Black Lives Matter protests spark calls to defund the police

The US currently spends more than $123 billion a year on policing, according to the US Census Bureau. Given that it's estimated that just 4% of calls to police are about violent crime, could the money be better spent elsewhere? New research led by Dr Jennifer Cobbina-Dungy, from Michigan State University in the US, examines the growing call to ‘defund the police’ in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement. She finds that protesters against police violence and racial inequalities support the principle of defunding, but that the terminology might be in need of refinement.

The New York Times reported that the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests were attended by up to 26 million people, making it the largest social movement in US history. The movement began in 2013 as a hashtag on social media, after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the shooting of Black teenager Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. Civil unrest led BLM to gather pace following the later deaths of other Black civilians at the hands of police, including Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland. However, it was the fatal shooting of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky and the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020 by a white police officer, that sparked nationwide protests and gained global support for the BLM movement.

BLM has brought people from all walks of life together to protest against police violence and racial inequalities. Dr Jennifer Cobbina-Dungy, Professor in the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University, US, interviewed nearly 200 protesters and residents for her 2019 book, Hands Up Don’t Shoot: Why the protests in Ferguson and Baltimore matter and how they changed America. Following the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, Cobbina-Dungy has led new research based on interviews with protesters who attended the ‘Get Your Knee Off Our Necks’ Commitment March in Washington, DC in August 2020. Published in the journal Criminology and Public Policy, the study focuses on the calls to ‘defund the police’ that have accompanied the BLM movement. Probing public perception and understanding of the slogan, Cobbina-Dungy and colleagues find that the majority of protesters think of defunding as a two-step process to reduce police department budgets and then reallocate resources towards much-needed services in local communities.

IDENTIFYING PERCEPTIONS AND THEMES

Cobbina-Dungy and her colleagues conducted in-depth, qualitative interviews with 28 protesters following the 2020 Commitment March. Aged between 23 and 74, 79% of the volunteers who took part identified as Black, and the majority as women. Most had a college degree and reported their politics as liberal or radical liberal. Interviewees were asked about their experience with, and perceptions of, the police. Questions included whether and how many times they or people they knew had been harassed or mistreated by the police, and whether they thought that the police did a good job in responding to calls for help, enforcing the law, and solving crime. They were asked about police attitudes and their personal reactions to the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, as well as what they understood by the slogan ‘defund the police’. Participants were also asked how America could move forward as a nation.

Interviewees’ responses were analysed and coded to identify emerging themes and whether the themes were shared with others. Protesters were categorised according to their level of commitment to BLM: ‘revolutionary’ protesters who protested almost daily and may have experienced aggressive police tactics; ‘intermittent’ protesters who protested at least three or more times but were committed to the cause; ‘tourist’ protesters who protested fewer than three times but were curious about BLM; and ‘new’ protesters who were moved to protest by the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. While 40% of interviewees were more experienced ‘revolutionary’ or ‘intermittent’ protesters, the majority were categorised as ‘new’ or ‘tourist’ protesters.

POLICE HARASSMENT

The majority of protesters think of defunding as a two-step process: to reduce police department budgets and reallocate resources towards much-needed services in local communities.


Around a fifth of protesters across all protester types regarded the ‘defund the police’ slogan as problematic. Some felt that ‘defund’ is confusing and open to deliberate misinterpretation by opponents. Others, especially ‘new’ and ‘tourist’ protester types, felt that the term could put people off and suggest doing away with the police altogether, which they feared could lead to anarchy.

A few ‘revolutionary’ and ‘intermittent’ interviewees did want to abolish the police, and as one said, ‘reimagine a different way of operating’ in society. A few other protesters supported
Defunding because they wanted to see the ‘dismantling’ of law enforcement. One explained: ‘There’s no reason police should be able to dock themselves out in military grade equipment for peaceful protests.’

Most interviewees argued that the police are needed to keep law and order, but that they are expected to do too much and to deal with societal problems as well as crime. While a few called for reallocation of funding within police budgets to improve officer training in community issues, two-thirds of participants thought that crime could be prevented or reduced if some police resources were reallocated to community services that meet people’s immediate needs. Examples given included youth clubs, mental health services, school-based anti-poverty initiatives, and affordable housing. One protester said that this would ‘take some of the pressure off the police so they aren’t the ones that always have to do the heavy lifting’.

Defund the police is understood by protesters with differing levels of commitment to the BLM movement. It confirms that protester type shapes people’s responses and provides a more nuanced view than the opinion polls that are often used to gauge public perceptions of controversial subjects.

Some protesters interviewed for the study had reservations about the terminology of ‘defund the police’, but most thought of defunding as a two-step process that starts with the reduction of police budgets and is followed by reallocation of funding associated with the BLM movement. She comments: ‘The overrepresentation of Black people as victims of police violence is tied to overenforcement on police to address structural problems. Defunding the police offers a solution to addressing the root causes of crime by ameliorating the conditions that give rise to high levels of crime and making investments that increase economic mobility.’

However, Dr Cobbina-Dungy and colleagues find that ‘defund the police’ is a complicated term which is open to manipulation by the mass media according to political or other agendas.

Defunding the police can change America’s perception of controversial subjects. Cobbina-Dungy and her collaborators’ research shows significant support across a range of protestor types for the call to ‘defund the police’ that has become the ‘demilitarisation’ of law enforcement. It confirms that protester type shapes people’s responses and provides a more nuanced view than the opinion polls that are often used to gauge public perceptions of controversial subjects.

The research is the first to assess how ‘defund the police’ is understood by a range of different protestors.

The research developed by Cobbina-Dungy and her colleagues suggests that there is a need to be mindful of the language used around defunding the police, as it can be manipulated by different audiences at which the messaging is targeted. The study showed that different media outlets are more likely to use certain terms, which can influence public opinion and lead to biased perceptions of the protesters and the movement.

The research also highlights the importance of understanding how different communities perceive the term ‘defund the police’ and how this can impact their decisions on defunding. The study found that people from different racial backgrounds, gender, and age groups have different perceptions of the term, which can affect their willingness to support defunding the police.

The research shows that defunding the police is not a one-size-fits-all solution, as it can have different effects on different communities. It is important to understand how defunding the police can be implemented in a way that benefits all communities, and not just those that are currently facing the most issues.

The research findings suggest that defunding the police can be a powerful tool in addressing the root causes of crime and reducing police violence against Black people. However, it is important to ensure that the reallocation of funding does not lead to a decrease in public safety, as this can have negative consequences for communities.

The study also calls for more research on the long-term effects of defunding the police, as well as the potential for defunding to be a catalyst for broader systemic changes in the criminal justice system. The research highlights the need for a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to addressing police violence and reducing crime, which includes addressing the root causes of crime and making investments in community-based solutions.

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