

CFRA Issue Brief

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent
about things that matter.”

— Martin Luther King Jr., I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches
That Changed the World

With the newly awakened awareness of the American people, coupled by the desire to transform, personally and publicly, this Center for Reflective Action issue brief will focus on one aspect of criminal justice reform. There are a myriad of policies and practices, joined with funding resources that could be addressed. However, in light of the current trends and callings, I thought that Defund the Police was a manageable, targeted aspect of the Criminal Justice Reform.

There is much written and spoken about with regard to defunding the police, so hopefully, this overview will provide some insights, understandings, and reflections to ponder or further research.

At the end of the narrative, there are a few poems from incarcerated women and men. I offer these as a form of prayer for your contemplation, reflection, and meditation.

Words and imagery are powerful means to convey one’s inner soul while offering to bear it for us to garner a deeper awareness of the plight of the people who are incarcerated.

Carol Allan, SSJ

Defund the Police

What does it mean?

There has long been a movement advocating to reallocate money from police departments and reinvesting it in multiple services for the community. Of late the call to “defund the police” has been heard from one coast to the other, from north to south, in cities and in rural areas. This cry has gathered support from many groups, people, and politicians. Listening is happening.

Is divesting from monetary support to our police departments a wise asking? “For years, community groups have advocated for defunding law enforcement – taking money away from police and prisons – and reinvesting those funds in services. The basic principle is that government budgets and “public safety” spending should prioritize housing, employment, community health, education and other vital programs, instead of police officers. Advocates argue that defunding is the best way forward

since attempts to reform police practices over the last five years have failed, as evidenced by the brutal killing of George Floyd. Groups have a range of demands, with some seeking modest reductions and others viewing full defunding as a step toward abolishing contemporary police services.” (The Guardian)

Collected data shows police budgets have significantly increased in the past years while overall crime has been consistently decreasing. The greatest disparity is between funding police departments over social services, like mental health, preschool programs, affordable housing, health care, treatment programs. Until now.

The current protests and rallying cries of the people have drawn attention to the inequalities of funding and distribution of those funds. The purchase of military equipment by police departments “to protect the citizens” have gone unnoticed by most. Tanks, uniforms, vehicles, and weapons have been purchased and stockpiled by local departments “in case”...in case of what? Protests? Rallies? People gathering who are voicing different opinions? Challenges of current practices? Denouncing brutality? Asking to be heard? Joining in prayer? Questioning authority? Some of the above or all of the above?

Have we grown into a people who treat others as objects? Have we become unable to listen to differences of opinions? Has our intolerance reached such heights that we don't see the damage that is caused?

I believe in the triumph of the human spirit and the goodness of people. Naive, maybe. Idealist, absolutely. With the rallying cries, the tenacity, the focus, and the belief in humanity the protesters have influenced mayors and governors who are currently evaluating and reallocating funds from their police departments to social services. It can be done. It will be done. Colleges, public school systems, museums and other institutions are looking to divesting from police. The people are speaking. They will be heard. They must be heard.

Where do we go from here! Reducing police forces and dismantling the current law enforcement systems would be a start. Fund “non-police solutions to the problems poor people face”, such as counselors for mental health calls and addiction experts responding to situations, may actually increase safety.

According to [The Guardian](#), abolition groups have argued that policing and prison are at their core racist and harmful making communities less safe. They also point out that the vast majority of police work has nothing to do with responding to or preventing violence. Police emphasis on solving

murders, handle rape and domestic violence cases are often sidelined by their focus on what is known as ‘low-level’ crimes. In New York City when officers did less responding to these low level crimes, there was a drop in overall crime. Many of the ‘low-level’ crimes happen in minority neighborhoods, socio-economically challenged neighborhoods, and neighborhoods where young people gather, on basketball courts, playgrounds, soccer fields, or the household stoop.

In the United States of America, we have a problem with violence and guns. We center our attention on objectifications as opposed to people. We have dehumanized each other to establish a “law and order” country. Yet, the recent protests debunk this theory of law and order. We the people have spoken. Reallocation of funds is being asked. Might it be the answer! Might it work! It is worth a try. The spirit of the divine is at work. Let us respond with hearts and souls open to the movement of the holy.

Carol Allan, ssj

*Reflective moments from within the criminal justice system:
Poetry from inside Prison*

Thriving and Surviving by Paul C.

There is a river of courage flowing out of me,

Through many dangers, on rebellious soil I have come. I have, at times, been victorious

At others times, perhaps not.

But, still, this day before and after Is a lamp in the corner of my soul. It Keeps Burning.
It Keeps Seeking. A New Day.

Poetry from the Women, Writing and Incarceration Project; in Celebration of National Poetry Month

If I could build a statue it would be of me
of what I want to be It would be the

New Me...

I would build the statue

in a mirror, you see, So, everyday, I could
I'd look at the New Me...

I'd build the New Me
of the Sunshine and Rain, So, in the mirror, I'd see
Array of light around Me a cleansing of my soul
as the tears rain down I'd build a statue of a Rainbow
in the mirror, I see to Remind Me of the many
colors, that I can choose to Be...
I'd look to the End of the Rainbow to strife, so, hard to be Me.

Possible Action Steps

1. Oppose attempts to impose or expand the death penalty in your state and our country. Support the Massachusetts Citizens Against the Death Penalty and National Coalition Against the Death Penalty.
2. Promote prisoner reentry programs. Often the most difficult time for a former inmate is trying to reintegrate into his or her community. Sr. Mary Quinn, SSJ works in the reentry program for the Sheriff's Department, contact her for ideas on how best to support people reentering their communities.
3. Support programs in your community that engage youth and build their self-esteem: Holyoke, Chicopee, Springfield Boys & Girls Clubs, Girl's Inc. in Holyoke, Homework House, and Gray House or a local program in your area.
4. In conversation, explain that Defund the Police is about reimagining, reallocating funds for people most in need: social services, mental health programs, after school programs, childcare, or access to health services.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER REFLECTION:

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2020/06/19/what-does-defund-the-police-mean-and-does-it-have-merit/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/05/defunding-the-police-us-what-does-it-mean>

Article referenced by Carol Allan