

Defund the Police After 2020: Polarized Public Discourse, Media Framing, and the Movement's Current Trajectory

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Abstract: Public debate about “defund the police” surged after the 2020 murder of George Floyd, but the phrase quickly became a contested slogan rather than a stable policy program. Drawing on scholarship on protest framing and media discourse, as well as empirical work tracking public opinion and municipal budgeting after 2020, this paper synthesizes how supporters and detractors construct the meaning of “defund” and how those arguments have shaped policy outcomes. Across the literature, supporters frame defunding as divestment from over-policing and reinvestment in housing, health, education, and non-police crisis response, often emphasizing historical repair and the limits of “reform-only” approaches. Detractors frame defunding as a threat to public safety, commonly pairing budget rhetoric with de-policing narratives and portraying protest as disorder. The policy record since 2020 reflects this discursive struggle. While a small number of cities announced reductions or reallocations, many cuts were temporary and followed by partial reversals or renewed growth in policing budgets. The movement’s current state is best understood not as a single national policy shift but as an uneven reconfiguration of public-safety governance, including selective investments in alternative response models and accountability tools, occurring alongside continued political incentives to “refund” police. The paper concludes by identifying communication strategies and lessons for public-safety governance in polarized environments.

Keywords: Defund The Police, Public Discourse, Framing, Protest, Police Budgets, Political Backlash

Introduction

“Defund the police” entered mainstream U.S. politics in 2020 as both a rallying cry and an accusation. In public debate, the slogan was treated as everything from a call to abolish policing to a modest request to shift certain responsibilities away from armed officers. This semantic instability mattered because it shaped which speakers were treated as reasonable, which proposals were heard as feasible, and which coalitions could form around reform. Popular explanations and synopses describe the term as a spectrum. At one end is the abolition of, or deep divestment from, policing institutions. At the other end is the reallocation of some police funds toward social services, prevention, and specialized crisis response (Andrew, 2020; Caffrey, 2020; Lopez, 2020; Mollenkamp, 2025; Searcey, 2020). However, political opponents often collapsed this spectrum into a single claim that proponents sought to eliminate public safety, helping to turn “defund” into a partisan wedge (Elliott, 2021; Fegley & Murtazashvili, 2023).

This paper focuses on two related questions. First, how do supporters and detractors construct “defund the police” in public discourse, including the assumptions and evidence they treat as legitimate? Second, what is the movement’s current policy trajectory, especially with respect to police budgets and the uptake of alternative response models? To answer these questions, the paper synthesizes academic literature on news framing and protest, defund-specific media analyses, survey and experimental work on framing effects, and studies of municipal budgeting after 2020 (Banks, 2018; Craig & Reid, 2022; Culver & McLeod, 2023; Ebbinghaus et al., 2025; Hanink & Dunbar, 2024; Hunter et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2024).

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Research on social movements and political communication consistently finds that protest is often filtered through frames emphasizing disruption, conflict, or “law and order,” with consequences for public sympathy and policy response. In coverage of Black Lives Matter (BLM), this dynamic

can appear through a “protest paradigm” that privileges select voices, highlights property damage or clashes, and marginalizes activists’ substantive grievances (Culver & McLeod, 2023; Umamaheswar, 2020). Banks (2018) shows how “post-racial” rhetoric and norms of decorum can function to delegitimize Black activism by shifting attention from structural racism to protester behavior.

Defund-specific scholarship extends this work by examining how media narratives translate a contested slogan into policy meaning. Comparative analyses of U.S. news coverage find that outlets frequently foreground conflict and public-safety risk, while treating abolitionist or structural arguments as radical or incoherent (Craig & Reid, 2022). In a Canadian context, Hunter et al. (2024) similarly find that news coverage tends to narrow the defund agenda. Greater attention is given to “alternatives” such as civilian traffic enforcement, gender-based violence prevention, emergency mental health response, specialized investigative services, and investments in health and social service systems than to demands of reducing reliance on criminal enforcement for such issues.

From the policing side, post-2020 discussions emphasize legitimacy, accountability, and the logistical challenges of changing tactics and culture in the wake of a major wave of protest. Helfers et al. (2022) frame the 2020 protests as part of enduring arguments over police authority and democratic accountability and argue that lessons from the protest period should inform future policy and practice.

Two additional strands of research are especially important for understanding the link between discourse and policy. First, experimental work shows that how “defund” is defined changes public support. When framed as eliminating police, support declines. When framed as redirecting funds to other services, support is higher. This indicates that opposition is often rooted in the perceived meaning rather than the label itself (Smith et al., 2024). Second, analyses of budgeting after 2020 suggest that municipal commitments to cutting police budgets were frequently temporary and politically fragile. Budget changes appear to be shaped by local political context and can generate backlash that moves spending back toward policing (Ebbinghaus et al., 2025; Fegley & Murtazashvili, 2023).

Building on this literature, the paper treats “defund the police” as a discursive site where (a) definitions are contested, (b) responsibility for harm is allocated or obscured, and (c) proposed policies are marked as legitimate or illegitimate. This framework highlights two mechanisms, framing and boundary work. Framing is how an issue is defined and evaluated, and boundary work refers to the ways actors distinguish ‘reasonable reform’ and ‘radical abolition’ (Banks, 2018; Craig & Reid, 2022; Smith et al., 2024).

Data and Methods

This manuscript uses a narrative synthesis to analyze discourse. The data sources include peer-reviewed studies on media framing of BLM and defund demands, survey and experimental research on framing’s influence on public support, and empirical studies of police funding after 2020. These are supplemented by public accounts from mainstream journalism and movement media that shaped popular understandings of the slogan (Balko, 2014; Balto, 2021; Caffrey, 2020; Elliott, 2021; Lopez, 2020; Manthey et al., 2022; Mollenkamp, 2025; Searcey, 2020; Defund the Police, 2022). This work identifies recurring interpretive frames used by supporters and detractors and links those frames to documented policy trajectories (Culver & McLeod, 2023; Ebbinghaus et al., 2025; Fegley & Murtazashvili, 2023). In addition to peer-reviewed literature, the analysis incorporates public statements from advocacy organizations, police associations, and policy groups as primary discourse data. These statements are not treated as neutral descriptions of policy. They are framing artifacts that show how actors define public safety, assign responsibility, and distinguish legitimate reform from perceived threats to the social order (Black Lives Matter, 2021; Fraternal Order of Police, 2021).

Findings: Supporter and Detractor Discourses

Across the reviewed sources, “defund” functions less like a single policy demand and more like a moral argument about what public safety is and who is entitled to it. Supporters and detractors often speak past one another because they start from different places, draw on different facts about policing, harm, and effectiveness, and adhere to different standards of proof for demonstrating what works. These frequently result in polarization and mutual misrecognition. Supporters hear any rejection of defund as indifference to police violence, while detractors hear defund as indifference to victimization and disorder (Craig & Reid, 2022; Smith et al., 2024).

Supporter discourse: divest–invest–experiment and historical repair

Not all supporters of defunding advocate abolition. Some organizations frame defunding as partial budget reallocation and institutional specialization, while abolitionist groups frame policing itself as structurally incapable of delivering justice. Although these positions overlap rhetorically, they differ in their ultimate policy goals. Reform-oriented discourse tends to emphasize narrowing police responsibilities and expanding alternative crisis-response systems, whereas abolitionist discourse questions the legitimacy of policing institutions as necessary for social order.

Supporter discourse typically advances a divest–invest logic. They advocate for reducing the footprint of armed policing and reinvesting resources into services that address the social conditions associated with crisis and harm. This divest–invest frame appears explicitly in movement literature. Black Lives Matter (2021) argued that defunding the police should be paired with “community investment.” At the same time, the Defund Police Community Resource Hub (n.d.) defined the movement as divesting from institutions that “kill, harm, cage and control” communities and investing instead in housing, health care, employment, and violence-prevention strategies. This rhetoric does more than request a budget change. It redefines safety as the product of social conditions rather than police presence. In popular explanations, this is framed as reallocating a portion of police budgets to housing, education, health care, and community-based safety strategies (Caffrey, 2020; Lopez, 2020; Mollenkamp, 2025). Similar themes appear in academic literature, where these are often presented as practical changes. Police are asked to respond to too many non-criminal or non-violent problems, including mental-health crises and homelessness, for which alternative responders may be better suited (Smith et al., 2024).

Supporters also emphasize righting historical wrongs. Some organizations extend this argument into abolitionist discourse. Critical Resistance describes policing and imprisonment as institutional reactions to “economic, social and political problems” rather than solutions to them (Critical Resistance, 2024). In this framing, policing is not simply overfunded or improperly managed. It is seen as part of a broader system that entrenches racialized inequality. The emphasis, therefore, shifts from reforming police institutions to reducing their footprint and replacing many of their functions with non-carceral alternatives. Balto (2021) places contemporary calls to defund within longer histories of community control, arguing that resource reallocation functions as a corrective to institutions that have produced predictable harm for marginalized communities. Within media discourse, abolition-leaning arguments often highlight the limits of incremental reform and the persistence of racialized enforcement. However, these arguments are frequently minimized or treated as outside the mainstream of policy debate (Banks, 2018).

In the context of Canadian news analyzed by Hunter et al. (2024), the supporters’ agenda appears as a cluster of demands that include alternatives to police services, decriminalization, and disarmament/demilitarization. However, the public-facing discourse most often disseminated through mainstream outlets is the “alternatives” frame. It presents defund as a system redesign rather than anti-police sentiments (Hunter et al., 2024). The alternatives frame also works rhetorically by making police response appear contingent rather than inevitable. The Defund Police Community Resource Hub (n.d.) links divestment from

policing with investments in “community-based safety strategies,” including housing, health care, employment programs, and efforts to prevent and interrupt violence. Similarly, after 2020, movement-produced media framed defunding as an ongoing campaign for community investment rather than a one-time budget demand (Defund the Police, 2022). This language presents public safety as a governance design problem in which communities can choose which institutions are empowered, funded, and legitimized. This framing presents police as one possible public-safety institution among many rather than the assumed center of social order.

Detractor discourse: public safety risk, de-policing narratives, and skepticism of alternatives

Detractor discourse commonly frames defunding as a threat to public safety. “Defund” is interpreted as reducing police budgets and law enforcement capacity, which will contribute to increasing crime and expose residents to greater risks (Mollenkamp, 2025). This frame is politically potent because it treats any budget reduction, even if paired with reinvestment, as a direct tradeoff against protection. Influential law-enforcement organizations and conservative policy groups frequently framed defunding as an immediate threat to public order. The Fraternal Order of Police described defunding as a “dangerous and reckless” trend, while the Heritage Foundation characterized calls to defund and dismantle police as “ill-advised” and likely to increase crime and instability (Fraternal Order of Police, 2021; Malcolm & Stimpson, 2020). Such rhetoric relies heavily on anticipatory risk framing by presenting budget reductions as directly connected to violence, disorder, and institutional collapse.

Detractors also mobilize de-policing narratives. They claim that criticism, accountability efforts, or reduced budgets cause police to step back, which then leads to increased crime. Empirical tests of de-policing after George Floyd provide a more complicated picture, challenging sweeping versions of this claim (Koslicki, 2022). Nevertheless, the de-policing story rhetorically functions as an anticipatory warning. Reforms are framed as dangerous because they will “handcuff” officers and reduce enforcement (Craig & Reid, 2022; Koslicki, 2022).

Perceptions of protest also influence support for reform efforts. Survey evidence suggests that people can endorse some reform goals while disapproving of a movement’s tactics or of the protesters. These views shape support for specific policy changes (Hanink & Dunbar, 2024). This helps explain why depictions of protest as disorder can become a powerful device in anti-defund discourse.

Supporter and detractor discourse relies on different moral and rhetorical vocabularies. Supporter discourse commonly employs redistributive verbs such as “invest,” “redirect,” and “reimagine,” which imply transformation and collective care. Detractor discourse instead relies on terms such as “dangerous,” “reckless,” “crime,” and “disorder,” emphasizing vulnerability, instability, and institutional decline (Black Lives Matter, 2021; Fraternal Order of Police, 2021). The conflict, therefore, is not only over budgets but also over competing definitions of safety and which institutions are authorized to produce it.

Finally, detractor discourse often treats protest itself as a problem of order. Culver and McLeod (2023) show how news coverage emphasizing civil disobedience and isolated violence can be used by political elites to justify “anti-riot” or “anti-protest” legislation, shifting attention away from underlying grievances. This dynamic is consistent with broader BLM coverage patterns that highlight nuisance, disruption, or conflict (Umamaheswar, 2020).

Language and responsibility: how institutions and media describe police violence

Public discourse about defunding is also shaped by how police violence is framed in conventional and journalistic language. Balko (2014) documents how passive constructions such as “an officer-involved shooting occurred” can obscure agency and responsibility. This semantic move can

reduce support for accountability. When responsibility is linguistically obscured, the moral urgency of arguments for divestment may be harder to sustain, and counter frames that emphasize uncertainty or split-second decisions resonate more (Balko, 2014; Banks, 2018).

The Movement's Policy Trajectory and Current State (2020-2026)

A recurring finding across budget-focused studies and journalistic audits is the gap between rhetorical prominence and durable fiscal change. Manthey et al.'s (2022) review of city budget data reported that many large U.S. cities increased police funding after 2019, even as "defunding" became a prominent political talking point. Peer-reviewed analyses reach similar conclusions while adding causal nuance. Commitments to reducing police budgets were often reversed, and political backlash helps explain why (Ebbinghaus et al., 2025; Fegley & Murtazashvili, 2023).

Ebbinghaus et al. (2025) examine whether 2020 protest intensity translated into budget cuts and find that local political context conditions outcomes, with evidence consistent with backlash dynamics. Fegley and Murtazashvili (2023) similarly document a pattern of "defund" pledges followed by "refunding," arguing that institutional and political incentives contributed to the persistence of policing budgets. These backlash dynamics were also shaped by competing public interpretations of what "defund" meant. Smith et al. (2024) show that public support for defunding largely depends on how the term is defined. Support is higher when "defund" is understood as redirecting police funds to social services. It is lower when interpreted as eliminating the police. This helps explain why opponents could more easily mobilize support by equating defunding with abolition, disorder, or reduced protection. Local officials, therefore, faced competing pressures. There were demands for reform after George Floyd's murder, along with electoral incentives to maintain visible public-safety capacity and avoid blame for perceived crime or disorder. Together, these studies suggest that the movement's policy impact is more visible in agenda-setting and experimentation than in sustained reductions in police spending.

At the same time, discourse shaped concrete policy debates and legislative negotiations. Elliott (2021) argues that the slogan's ambiguity and political toxicity complicated federal reform efforts by making it easier for opponents to portray even modest proposals as extreme. This helps explain why many officials shifted from "defund" language to "reform" or "refund" messaging, even as they continued discussing alternative response models (Mollenkamp, 2025). Therefore, the best way to describe the movement's current state is mixed. For the most part, there have not been large, sustained reductions in police budgets. However, movement organizations still frame defunding as active efforts to enhance community investments and alternative safety structures (Defund Police, 2022; Fegley & Murtazashvili, 2023; Manthey et al., 2022). On one hand, major cities have generally not maintained large-scale defunding, and many budgets have returned to or surpassed pre-2020 levels (Fegley & Murtazashvili, 2023; Manthey et al., 2022). On the other hand, the movement has contributed to a more mainstream public-safety vocabulary that includes crisis response teams, co-responder models, and non-police interventions as legitimate components of safety governance (Lopez, 2020; Smith et al., 2024).

Discussion

Together, these findings suggest several ways public discourse shapes efforts to reform policing. First, the debate shows that slogans can succeed at agenda-setting yet fail as a stable policy message. Because the public brings different default definitions to the phrase "defund the police," the same label can activate support for change among some audiences and fear of neglect among others (Caffrey, 2020; Smith et al., 2024).

Second, media framing and protest paradigms shape the opportunity structure for reform. When coverage focuses on conflict, nuisance, or selective interpretations, activists' substantive proposals are less likely to be heard on their own terms, and restrictive policy

responses become easier to justify (Culver & McLeod, 2023; Umamaheswar, 2020). This suggests that movement outcomes depend not only on the merits of policy proposals but also on the communicative environment in which proposals are introduced (Banks, 2018; Craig & Reid, 2022).

Third, budget politics appears to reward ambiguity in the short run but punish it in institutional settings. If “defund” is interpreted as elimination, policymakers face strong incentives to disavow it. But if it is interpreted as redirection, they may still adopt discrete reallocations or pilot programs without embracing the label (Ebbinghaus et al., 2025; Fegley & Murtazashvili, 2023; Smith et al., 2024). For proponents of defunding the police, these suggest two design-and-communication lessons. There is a need to specify which functions will move away from the police and to state the performance measures that will define success for the receiving systems (Lopez, 2020; Smith et al., 2024).

Conclusions

“Defund the police” remains influential as a narrative six years after the 2020 protests that reframed public safety as a social investment issue. However, it has not produced broad, sustained reductions in police budgets. Two competing narratives shape public discourse. One, advanced by supporters, emphasizes specialization, social repair, and reinvestment. The other, from detractors, focuses on risk, disorder, and institutional constraint. Budget analyses indicate that backlash and institutional persistence have limited the durability of early defund commitments. Experimental and framing research shows that the public’s interpretation of the slogan strongly predicts their support. Future research should connect these strands by tracking how specific reallocations (for example, behavioral health response programs) affect community trust and long-term budget lines as responsibilities migrate away from police (Ebbinghaus et al., 2025; Fegley & Murtazashvili, 2023; Smith et al., 2024).

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