

## Race, Political Ideology, and Support for Defunding the Police in the United States

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### Abstract

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This study investigates public attitudes toward “Defund the Police” proposals amid U.S. protests against racism and police brutality. Analysis of 2021 General Social Survey data reveals that racial identity and political ideology significantly shape these attitudes. Black Americans demonstrate the highest support for defunding, followed by Hispanic Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities, reflecting diverse historical and cultural experiences with the government. Political ideology further polarizes opinions, with liberals more supportive and conservatives more opposed. These findings highlight the complexities of addressing systemic issues in criminal justice and the importance of social identities in shaping attitudes toward police reform.

**Keywords:** *Defund the police, Black Lives Matter, race, political ideology*

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## **Background to the Study**

The “Defund the Police” movement has quickly gained national attention as part of the broader Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless other innocent and unarmed Black Americans have raised a critically important question about police funding. Many protesters believe too much of the country's budget goes toward policing and support reallocating funds from law enforcement to other forms of public safety (Baranauskas, 2022). Using data from the 2021 General Social Survey, this study addresses the research question: Do Americans support defunding the police? Additionally, it empirically investigates the following research questions: What factors are associated with attitudes toward defunding the police? Specifically, how do social identity factors such as race and ideology shape attitudes toward defunding the police? This study makes three important contributions to the literature. First, while significant research has examined the support for increasing or decreasing police funding, this study explores the theoretically distinct concept of defunding the police, which involves not only reducing police spending but also reallocating those funds to social services. Second, while little research has examined public attitudes toward defunding the police (with notable exceptions, Baranauskas, 2022; Vaughn et al., 2022), the need to better understand important heterogeneity by race and ideology in these attitudes has been identified as an existing gap in the literature (Vaughn et al., 2022). This study also broadens the traditional Black-White paradigm of evaluating public perceptions of the police by including Hispanic and Asian Americans. Finally, while previously published studies have relied on non-probability samples to explore attitudes about defunding the police, limiting generalizations to the broader population (e.g., Baranauskas, 2022), this research over-comes that limitation by using a nationally representative sample.

## **Defund the Police**

The call to “defund the police” became a rallying cry of protests following the brutal death of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man killed in police custody in May 2020 (Chudy & Jefferson, 2021). The rise of this demand in protests against racism and police brutality highlights the need to understand its meaning, origins, and historical context. Distinct from the “disbanding” or “abolishing the police” movement, “defund the police” refers to divesting funding from police departments and redirecting it to alternative community services that provide needed intervention without creating pathways into the criminal justice system (Baranauskas, 2022; Vaughn et al., 2022). Advocates argue that funds should be reallocated to social services that address poverty, mental illness, addiction, and homelessness treating them as public health issues rather than criminal justice matters. They also call for investment in education, job opportunities, housing, and youth programs, which aim to reduce crime by addressing its root causes and limiting police involvement in nonviolent situations (Baranauskas, 2022; Vaughn et al., 2022). To understand the call to defund the police, it is necessary to examine law enforcement spending patterns. From 1980 to 2010, state and local spending on law enforcement steadily rose, reaching inflation-adjusted levels 300% higher than in 1960, even as crime rates fell in the 1990s (Bump, 2020). Total law enforcement spending at all levels of government as a percentage of national income increased from about 1% in 1980 to about 2% today, peaking at 2.5% in 2010, driven primarily by massive

investment in police, prisons, and technology, spurred by the war on drugs (Ingraham, 2020). As calls to defund the police gained political traction after George Floyd's death, many cities cut or redirected police funding, including \$1 billion in New York, \$120 million in San Francisco, \$46 million in Seattle, \$33 million in Philadelphia, and \$8 million in Minneapolis (Thiessen, 2021). Defunding the police is distinct from attitudes about decreasing law enforcement spending because it deals with two different sets of public goods. The first set is associated with public order, so policy responses to crime and community safety involve a combination of regulatory (crime control) and distributive (crime prevention) policies. The second set of public goods relates to social welfare, where redistributive, and to some extent distributive, policies play a key role in addressing healthcare, affordable housing, and other social pro-grams geared toward assisting the unemployed, low-income, and economically marginalized people in the community. Therefore, public attitudes toward defunding the police are unique because they are influenced by factors that traditionally shape attitudes toward law enforcement, such as race and ideology, and are also closely aligned to research supporting redistributive spending (Rudolph & Evans, 2005). To examine public attitudes toward defunding the police, we rely on broader criminal justice and government spending literature, which identifies the influence of social identity factors such as race and political ideology as well as socio-demographic correlates.

### **Social Identity and Policy Attitudes**

In examining what factors are associated with attitudes toward defunding the police, social identity theories help to unpack the different ways that group membership provides a lens through which to view enforcement spending. Research shows that membership in salient social groups is a source of meaning that frames how individuals perceive and interact with the world (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). This social identity also contributes to how individuals process information, especially in contexts that activate the salience and strength of group identity in relation to the perceived “other” (Lodge & Taber, 2005). Group identity can be a factor that motivates members to differentiate them-selves from other groups (Taşdemir, 2011), usually in a way that situates their own group in the most positive light (Jackson et al., 2022). Furthermore, group identity can forge shared prior beliefs and expectations, which in turn frame an individual's perceptions (Jefferson et al., 2021). Race and political ideology are each important aspects of group identity that shape policy a Race and policy attitudes In American society, race significantly shapes social identity. The experiences of White, Black, Hispanic, Asian American, and other racial and ethnic groups differ greatly, influencing their worldview and social interactions. Particularly, the experiences of White and Black individuals within the criminal justice system have long-standing divisions based on a history of racism and injustice that continues to affect current interactions with police (Peffley & Hurwitz, 2010). This divergence was brought to the forefront of public attention with the rise of Black Lives Matter, a protest movement that reframed Americans' understanding of police treatment of people of color (Chudy & Jefferson, 2021). Calling out the injustice of deaths of Black people at the hands of police, BLM has “proven to be a salient political force, drawing enormous attention from all sides of the political spectrum at the local and national levels” (Williamson et al., 2018, p. 400).

The issue of police brutality has been thrust into the national spot-light due to the widespread use of cell phone cameras and social media to record and share videos of police violence toward unarmed Black people, galvanizing public outrage and shaping public opinion (Freelon et al., 2016). Research shows that race influences attitudes toward police, explaining both satisfaction with and support for law enforcement (Morris & LeCount, 2020; Wu, 2014; Wu et al., 2009). Black Americans and people of color are less likely than White Americans to hold favorable attitudes toward police or to support additional public spending on law enforcement (Wu et al., 2009). These race-based disparities in attitudes are linked to differences in contact with the police and experiences with crime and victimization in impoverished racial-ethnic minority communities (Morris & LeCount, 2020; Wu et al., 2009). Black adults are more likely than White adults to be stopped by the police and to report negative interactions (Epp et al., 2014). Research also shows that Black Americans receive more severe sentences for the same crimes (Peffley & Hurwitz, 2010) and are twice as likely to be killed by police as White Americans (Jenkins et al., 2024). The historical context of Black experiences with the police, inextricably linked with the aftermath of slavery and systemic racism, provides insight into current attitudes toward police and law enforcement funding.

Following the Civil War, the rise of the prison industrial complex offered an alternative to enslavement through the convict lease system, in which many recently freed people of color were arrested for minor offenses and punished through exorbitant fines and lengthy sentences, often working on former slave plantations (Alexander, 2010). During this same period, socially sanctioned lynchings, often celebrated as public spectacle, were used as mechanisms of intimidation and control, with Black males accounting for over 70% of the 4,000 lynchings taking place between 1881 and 1968 (Gilbert & Ray, 2016). In the post-civil rights era, police have been legally authorized to “regulate Black male bodies through traffic stops, stop and frisk, and zero-tolerance policies,” creating “legal entrapments, which systematically ensnare Black males into the criminal justice system,” often without probable cause or suspicious behavior (Gilbert & Ray, 2016, p. 130). These tactics raise questions about civil rights violations and racial bias in policing, creating a vicious cycle of mis-trust in the police that shapes Black attitudes. In addition, broader literature speaks to the influence of Anti-Black attitudes on support for the police, finding that racial prejudice and resentment correlate with White support for police use of force and views toward police misconduct (Morris & LeCount, 2020). Racial prejudice among White Americans has been found to be consistently correlated with support for punitive outcomes, including spending on crime control, attitudes toward police use of force, and the death penalty (Ousey & Unnever, 2012). Research linking racial attitudes and support for punitive criminal justice policy also contextualizes racial differences in the perception of recent high-profile cases of unarmed Black individuals killed by police, in which White individuals are much less likely to condemn the use of force or to see such events as interconnected (Morris & LeCount, 2020). Exploring responses to the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, Jefferson et al. (2021) find that “Black-White differences emerge as a function of different prior beliefs and expectations, which are themselves informed by race” (p. 15). These observations provide the basis for our first hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1:** Black Americans are more likely to support defunding the police than White Americans. The current literature on race/ethnicity and perception of the police has primarily focused on White and Black Americans (notable exception, Wu, 2014). This is concerning as Hispanic and Asian Americans are among the fastest-growing racial and ethnic groups in the United States, with projections indicating that the Asian population will double and the Hispanic population will nearly double by 2060 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2020). Furthermore, it is important to recognize that racial minorities do not have monolithic attitudes toward the police, primarily because of their distinct historical experiences with law enforcement. Black Americans have a long history of facing systemic racism and excessive use of force by the police. The Black Lives Matter movement has its roots in these experiences. In contrast, Hispanic and Asian communities, as more recent voluntary immigrant minority groups, may have unique experiences, concerns, and expectations related to interactions with the police. The Hispanic and Asian American communities include individuals with different ethnic backgrounds and immigration statuses. Their perceptions and attitudes toward law enforcement in the United States are significantly influenced by a complex interplay of historical experiences, immigration status, language barriers, and cultural background. The complicated relationship between the Hispanic community and law enforcement in the United States is profoundly influenced by immigration and deportation policies (Wu, 2014), alongside a disturbing history of police killings, police brutality, and discrimination against Hispanic individuals (Conteras, 2023). Throughout the 20th century, Hispanic communities faced various challenges and milestones in their interactions with the police.

The civil rights era saw the emergence of Hispanic civil rights movements advocating for equal treatment and protections under the law, mirroring the struggles of various marginalized communities. Additionally, the 1980s and 1990s brought about the intensification of immigration enforcement efforts, notably with the passage of immigration-related legislation, including the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA) (Paar-Jakli et al., 2023). The emergence of policies such as the 2008 Secure Communities program and Section 287(g) in 1997, designed to target undocumented immigrants, has intensified the complexities of the relationship. The Secure Communities program sought to identify undocumented immigrants through fingerprinting during the booking process, leading to concerns within the Hispanic community that even minor interaction with local law enforcement could result in deportation proceedings. Similarly, 287(g) Agreements allowed local law enforcement agencies to collaborate with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in immigration enforcement, raising fears within the community regarding potential racial profiling and discrimination (Paar-Jakli et al., 2023). Moreover, instances of police brutality and fatal shootings of Hispanic individuals have profoundly impacted the community's perceptions of law enforcement (Conteras, 2023). High-profile cases like the killings of Sean Monterrosa (Vallejo, CA), Andres Guardado (Gardena, CA), and Adam Toledo (Chicago, IL) have instilled a sense of fear and suspicion, underscoring the deeply rooted distrust many Hispanic Americans feel toward the police. These policies have created a climate of fear and mistrust, with many Hispanic individuals hesitant to speak out, organize large protests, report crimes, or cooperate with law enforcement out of concern for



their immigration status (Bellows, 2021; Paar-Jakli et al., 2023). These factors play a significant role in shaping their attitudes toward police funding and reform measures, as they grapple with issues of safety, justice, and equitable policing reforms. Therefore, we propose the next hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** Hispanic Americans are more likely to support defunding the police than White Americans. The history of Asian immigration to the United States is marked by a series of distinct waves, each characterized by unique circumstances and challenges. Beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Asian immigrants faced various forms of discrimination, exclusion, and hostility. Japanese American internment during World War II further underscored the vulnerability of Asian communities to state-sanctioned discrimination (Wu, 2014). Immigration status creates another salient factor shaping attitudes toward the police. Recent immigrants may carry experiences navigating complex immigration processes and facing uncertainties related to their legal status. Such individuals may perceive interactions with law enforcement as potential risks to their immigration status, intensifying feelings of vulnerability and caution during encounters with the police. Language barriers also play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of the police. Limited English proficiency can create communication challenges during interactions with law enforcement officers, potentially intensifying misunderstandings and anxiety. Cultural background and generational differences add complexity within the Asian American community. For instance, first-generation immigrants may hold distinct perspectives influenced by their experiences in their countries of origin, approaching law enforcement with expectations and norms rooted in their home countries, which can significantly differ from American policing practices. Conversely, second- and third-generation Asian Americans, who may have been born and raised in the United States, can exhibit attitudes more aligned with mainstream American culture. Their perceptions of law enforcement may be shaped by a combination of their cultural heritage and American upbringing, leading to nuanced and evolving viewpoints. The recent surge in hate crimes targeting Asian communities, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, has created an environment of fear and uncertainty. Some individuals seek protection from law enforcement, hoping for safety and justice. However, significant segments of the Asian American community doubt the effectiveness of police response to hate crimes, citing concerns about underreporting and reluctance from some law enforcement agencies to address the issue (Lantz & Wenger, 2022). Recognizing these complicated factors is essential in understanding the diversity of attitudes within minority communities and their complex relationship with the police. Our next hypothesis states:

**Hypothesis 3:** Asian Americans are more likely to support defunding the police than White American.

### **Political Ideology and Policy Attitudes**

In addition to race, political ideology arises as a significant social identity, facilitating defensive processing, which causes group members to filter and reject messages that do not comport with their ideological platform (Iyengar et al., 2012). In this era of extreme political

polarization, political parties are more ideologically unified internally and more externally divided in their policy preferences (Aldrich & Rohde, 2001). With Democrats increasingly identifying as liberal and Republicans as conservative, parties are “farther apart ideologically today than at any time in the past 50 years” (Pew Research Center, 2022). In addition, “growing shares in each party now describe those in the other party as more closed-minded, dis-honest, immoral and unintelligent than other Americans” (Pew Research Center, 2022). Over recent years, differing views of police reform have tracked with the divisions between conservatives and liberals (Chudy & Jefferson, 2021), increasing the salience of ideology as it relates to attitudes toward defunding the police (Jackson et al., 2022). Political ideology consistently arises as an important influence on support for law enforcement spending. Studies show a strong positive correlation between conservatism and support for police spending; those who identify as conservatives are more likely to support police funding than liberals or moderates (Morris & LeCount, 2020; Roscigno & Preto-Hodge, 2021). However, there is more to unpack in the complexity of the relationship between political ideology, partisan-ship, and support for police. In an analysis of voting behavior in the 2016 election, Drakulich et al. (2020) find that “those who said they supported the police were more likely to vote for Trump, but this was because they also tended to be people who identified as Republican and felt racial resentment” (p. 388–389). Additionally, Drakulich et al. (2020) notes that “perceptions of the police as biased and support for BLM, on the other hand, remained strongly and negatively associated with a vote for Trump” (p. 389). These ideological ties can be partly explained by partisan rhetoric on law and order as it has evolved since the 1960s. Politicians have historically used law and order rhetoric as a dog whistle, an implicit appeal to those fearful of changes to the racial order (Drakulich et al., 2020). Following the civil rights movement, Republicans employed the “southern strategy,” which included issuing coded appeal to White southern voters dissatisfied with post-civil rights changes to the racial hierarchy, using law and order rhetoric including references to support for the police, being tough on crime, and fighting the inner-city war on drugs (López, 2014). This continued for decades under conservative presidential candidates from Barry Goldwater and Richard Nixon to Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, and later rose anew with the candidacy of Donald Trump (Drakulich et al., 2020). According to Drakulich et al. (2020), “as recently as the 2008 election, a strong connection remained between implicit racial antipathy and support for law-and-order rhetoric and policies” (p. 375), thus reinforcing the complicated relationship between ideology, race, and support for the police. These findings provide the justification for the next hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 4:** Liberals are more likely to support defunding the police than moderates, whereas conservatives are less likely to support defunding the police than moderates.

### **Control Variables**

Research indicates that, in addition to race and political ideology, various demographic variables affect public perceptions of the police. Therefore, we included several control variables in our models. The extant literature suggests that self-interest explains attitudes toward government spending (Aitalieva & Park, 2019; Houston et al., 2016; Van de Walle & Jilke, 2014). Individuals are more likely to support those programs from which they might

benefit (Brook et al., 1998). Research shows that women are less supportive of police spending than men (Rosigno & Preto-Hodge, 2021). Additionally, age affects preferences for government spending (Sørensen, 2013). Older people favor increased spending on police, while young adults support decreased spending (Pew Research Center, 2021). More advantaged individuals, including those with higher income levels, are more likely to support defunding the police (Brunner et al., 2023; Rosigno & Preto-Hodge, 2021). Most studies show that individuals with lower socioeconomic status tend to hold less favorable opinions of the police, mainly because they have higher odds of being subjected to police control actions (Wu, 2014). Research reveals those subjective perceptions of crime shape attitudes toward the police and crime policy. While some studies found no association between fear of crime and attitudes toward the police (Morris & LeCount, 2020), others show a correlation with more punitive measures to address crime (e.g., Armbrorst, 2017) or negative evaluations of police (Baranauskas, 2022).

### **Data and Methods**

This study analyzes secondary data from the 2021 General Social Survey (Davern et al., 2021) conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago and funded by the National Science Foundation. The GSS is a nationally representative sample of adults over 18 in the United States, covering urban, suburban, and rural areas (Davern et al., 2021). Historically, the GSS used in-person interviews, but the 2021 GSS survey was the first-ever sample drawn largely from online interviews with a self-administered questionnaire. Therefore, research and interpretation done using the data—especially survey items related to race and policing—should take extra care to ensure the analysis reflects actual changes in public opinion and is not unduly influenced by the change in data collection methods during the COVID-19 global pandemic. For more details, please visit the official website: <https://gss.norc.org/Get-The-Data>.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Defund the police, spurred on by the injustice of police brutality against Black Americans, is at the forefront of public debate on law enforcement reform in the United States. This study sheds light on several important factors that help us better understand public attitudes toward defunding the police. First, social identity significantly shapes attitudes toward law enforcements pending and investment in social services. Race, as a powerful social identifier, frames these attitudes. Black Americans show the highest support for defunding the police, followed by Hispanic and other racial and ethnic minorities. The divergent lived experiences and historical context of racist treatment in the criminal justice system have shaped Black perspectives on the need for reform. Broad support from people of color could help to build a more powerful coalition for reform.

Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that attitudes toward defunding the police vary across racial and ethnic minority communities and are influenced by a complex interplay of historical experiences, socio-economic factors, and political ideologies. For example, police relationships with Asian and Hispanic communities may be strained due to immigration status, language barriers, cultural differences, unfamiliarity with the American justice system,



and social discrimination. The anti-immigration movement and associated legislation, which may require local police to enforce immigration laws, can further exacerbate tensions between immigrants and the police (Wu, 2014). The recent surge in hate crimes targeting Asian Americans has also influenced their perceptions of law enforcement, with some seeking police protection and others questioning the effectiveness of police response to such incidents. Therefore, while some individuals may support reallocating funds from police budgets to social services, others may prioritize public safety, considering immigration related issues, economic circumstances, and cultural background. In other words, attitudes toward defunding the police within racial and ethnic minority communities are complex and influenced by their unique interactions with law enforcement.

Second, political ideology as an aspect of social identity is becoming more salient in shaping attitudes. Polarization shapes the divide in attitudes along ideological lines, with conservatives see defunding negatively, whereas liberals see defunding as a positive mechanism of police reform. The role of ideology in interpreting and forming attitudes about this issue is unsurprising, given the historical and current-day use of racially tinged law and order rhetoric as a partisan tool, the heightened animosity and mistrust between conservatives and liberals, and the heavily polarized context in which information is increasingly transmitted through cable news and social media echo chambers

Third, understanding the underlying social identity factors that shape attitudes toward defunding the police sheds light on the future of police reform. If supporters want to see action on police reform and investment in social services, this research indicates that identifying aspects of reform and messaging that do not activate the us-other cleavages inherent in racial and ideological social identities could garner more widespread support. The positive influence of education on support for redirecting police funding to social services points to pathways of connection that can be forged as individuals develop a better understanding of and empathy toward the experiences and viewpoints of other groups. Although there is no clear consensus on defunding the police, until the underlying issues of police brutality and racial injustice in the criminal justice system are addressed, calls for reform will continue.

Fourth, despite widespread political action to defund the police and pass reform measures in cities across the United States in the wake of George Floyd's death (Chudy & Jefferson, 2021), partisan tides are shifting with the rise of crime in American cities. Recent increases in murder rates in cities have spurred many local governments to walk back defunding rhetoric and budget cuts for police departments (Thiessen, 2021).

Fifth, defunding the police as a reform mechanism faces challenges in implementation. Reducing funding for police has an immediate impact of reducing officers on the street, whereas investing in social services is a long-term prospect that targets the root causes of crime but may take years for gains to be fully realized. Further research is needed to better understand how police funding and investment in social services impact crime rates and measures of social justice in both the short term and long term.

Sixth, it is important to note how the United States compares with other similarly wealthy democracies. Many other countries also struggle with police brutality and tense relations between the police and ethnic and racial minorities, including immigrant communities. However, the United States far exceeds most advanced democracies in killing by police. In the U.S., police not only investigate crime and patrol communities but are also asked to resolve situations that they have not been properly trained to deal with, such as mental health issues, domestic violence, and drug abuse. In most European democracies, policing is seen as a small part of a holistic, community-based solution to social problems. Much of what U.S. advocates are calling for has been tried in other countries, offering models that the U.S. could consider and potentially adapt, e.g., Stockholm's mental health ambulance services, Scotland's violence reduction unit, Switzerland's alter-native sentencing approach, or Finland's housing-first strategy (Cheatham & Maizlan, 2022; Graham & Robertson, 2022).

Finally, in the United States, the movement for anti-carceral social work provides an alternative reform paradigm that shifts from police collaborations to community-centered models emphasizing mutual aid and restorative justice. Examples include the Just Discipline Project of Pittsburgh, The Young Women's Empowerment Project of Chicago, and the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective of Oakland, which address interpersonal violence, gender-based violence, and child sexual abuse using the anti-carceral approach (Jacobs et al., 2021). The CAHOOTS program in Eugene, Oregon, a decades-old community-based crisis intervention initiative, diverts mental health crisis responses from police to alternative programs. It has inspired similar programs, such as Phoenix's Crisis Response Network and Denver's STARS program (Giacomantonio, 2024). Although these programs are local, the American Rescue Plan passed by Congress in 2021 includes \$15 billion in federal grant funding to expand similar mobile crisis response units to additional states and localities (U.S. Congress, 2021). Noting that individuals with a history of mental illness represent quarter of all police killings (Jenkins et al., 2024), this funding provides a vital starting point.

Despite these steps forward, large-scale reforms of policing and criminal justice institutions are needed to stop police killings of unarmed people of color. Defund the Police reforms call for funds to be reinvested in support of the root problems of poverty, mental illness, addiction, and homelessness in a manner that diverts people away from the criminal justice system and into community-based social services. Further research is needed to identify and implement effective solutions to provide safety and meet basic needs while protecting the lives of unarmed civilians.

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