

Defunding the police: Could it hurt or help elder abuse efforts?

Why the answer is complicated and somewhat surprising.

By Richard Eisenberg Next Avenue | JULY 22, 2020 — 12:22PM



The growing movement around the country to defund the police is, in the words of the ACLU's policing policy adviser Paige Fernandez, about investing "in institutions, resources and services that help communities grow and thrive." So, I've been wondering: Could defunding the police initiatives wind up helping to prevent elder abuse and assist elder abuse victims?

"This is a complicated question," said Page Ulrey, a longtime elder abuse specialist in the King County, Wash., Prosecuting Attorney's office who is now a trial lawyer with Schroeter Goldmark & Bender in Seattle.

Both the police and local Adult Protective Services (APS) social service agencies typically deal with cases of elder abuse (a crime affecting an estimated 10% of Americans 60 and older).

The police, APS and elder abuse

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' website says that if someone you know is in immediate, life-threatening danger due to elder abuse, call the police or 911. Otherwise, if the danger is not immediate, "relay your concerns to the local adult protective services, long-term care ombudsman, or the police."

APS specializes in abused, neglected or exploited older adults; few members of police departments do. So, theoretically, if some money was diverted from the police to APS, it might then better assist elder abuse victims and their families.



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That's possible, experts in policing and elder abuse told me. But, I was surprised to learn, it's even more possible that defunding the police could be detrimental to elder abuse victims.

"What could happen is that defunding the police could have negative consequences" for handling elder abuse, said Brian Payne, an Old

Dominion University sociology and criminal justice professor who previously wrote the Arizona State University Center for Problem-Oriented Policing guide on physical and emotional abuse of the elderly.

For one thing, Payne said, most APS funding comes at the state level, while police departments are, of course, funded by cities and towns.

What defunding the police would mean

"If you defund the police, you're taking money from the local level and repurposing it to other local programs — unless you already have other local programs for older persons," said Payne. "If police are truly defunded, what police departments will do is look for what things they think they can stop spending money on."

So, elder abuse programs of police departments may be jeopardized by getting less money.

Meantime, these days, APS agencies are often understaffed and underfunded.

Said William Benson, national policy adviser for the National Adult Protective Services Association: "State APS agencies — and local APS agencies in a few states — are severely strapped for funding, a situation that promises only to get worse as demographics continue to drive up caseloads and now, as a result of the pandemic, will be further strapped by projected state revenue shortfalls."

As my Next Avenue colleague Grace Birnstengel noted in her article, ["Like Domestic Abuse, Elder Abuse Appears to Be Climbing, Too,"](#) Duke Han, who researches elder abuse at the University of Southern California, wrote in a recent paper about a "massive increase in reports of elder abuse during the pandemic."

Could defunding the police work against elder abuse victims?

Another concern: Defunding the police is likely to mean fewer police officers who could investigate criminal elder abuse cases, both physical and financial.

"Most APS workers are now mandated to refer cases involving potential criminal activity to police," said Elizabeth Loewy, the former chief of the elder abuse unit of the New York County District Attorney's office (and now

chief operating officer of the financial tech platform EverSafe).

With defunding the police, she asked, "Would there be fewer officers and detectives to whom they [APS] could report? Fewer cops who are now working closely with APS to keep them safe?"

Elder abuse training for police, Payne said, is already generally minimal. "In the police academy, by and large, there's very little exposure to elder abuse cases," he noted.

In a report for the federal Elder Justice Coordinating Council, Ulrey wrote that elder financial exploitation concepts are "rarely mentioned in police academies or in training for 911 dispatchers." And, she added, many police agencies lack connections to dementia experts, making it hard for the police to refute an abuser's claim that the victim with cognitive impairment gave consent.

Benson said APS would welcome more engagement by law enforcement in investigating incidents of abuse and exploitation but that, too frequently, "law enforcement resists the role."

What the public wants from the police

Joshua Page, a University of Minnesota sociology professor who is a criminal justice expert, said the public expects a lot from police officers.

"They respond to family disturbances, elder abuse, a culture of homelessness, traffic, all kinds of things they're not necessarily trained to do," said Page. "In many cases, they don't want to be doing a lot of these things. Police chiefs sometimes ask: 'Why are we expected to be a social worker, an elder specialist, a superhuman?'"

Younger police officers often have little or no experience with elder abuse, Payne noted.

"I think of parents as an example. No one trains us how to be a parent, but

we've had one, so we have that to go on," said Payne. "When police are responding to older persons, they've never been old. They haven't experienced that yet."

Another reason the question about elder justice and defunding the police is so complicated: Exactly what defunding the police is and where any unspent police money would go is fuzzy. This police reform idea has only recently begun getting serious attention.

"It's too early to say" whether defunding the police would send money to assist elder abuse victims, Page said. "There's just not much in the way of details." That's why, he added, anything he says about elder abuse and defunding the police "is pure speculation."

In an ideal situation, Page said, police professionals would know whether it was necessary for elder abuse calls to get law enforcement involved. "Maybe there could be reporting [of elder abuse] to a public safety agency which would decide whether to transfer it to law enforcement or health and human services."

Where diverted money might go

Some defund-the-police activists want to see money shifted to programs related specifically to mental health, housing and education. The ACLU thinks diverted funds should go toward community-run violence prevention programs.

In New York City, home to the nation's largest police force with the biggest budget (\$6 billion), Mayor Bill De Blasio has said he'd shift \$1 billion in police funding to other city agencies and that he'd like to reallocate \$500 million from the New York Police Department's capital budget toward building youth centers and other facilities in public housing developments, according to the Wall Street Journal. De Blasio and the New York City Council also agreed to cancel the planned hiring of 1,163 police officers, according to the New York Times. Some council members think the changes

don't go far enough. And activists with the NYC Budget Justice Campaign want to see money move to, among other things, education, homeless services, mental health services and programs for the aging.

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti hopes to cut \$100 million to \$150 million from the LAPD budget and reinvest it in communities of color.

The Minneapolis City Council just approved sending a public commission a proposed amendment to the city charter that could wind up on the ballot for voters in November. "If voters don't approve it, then we're back where we started," said Page.

The Minneapolis City Council amendment calls for replacing the police with a new agency that would take a "holistic, public-health oriented approach" to public safety. Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey and the police union oppose this idea, although Frey has said he wants "deep structural changes" in local policing.

"In Minneapolis, it seems the idea is not to abolish the police department, but to shrink the police so its main function is responding to violence and helping to prevent violence," said Page. Where any potential budget cuts would go instead is unclear.

A question worth exploring

Each of the experts I interviewed thought the question of what defunding the police would mean for elder abuse was intriguing and worth exploring.

"It's really important for people to work on these issues and participate in these conversations," said Page. "I'd hope that those who are involved with elder abuse issues would be involved in those conversations."

Noted Payne: "It's a great question and an opportunity to talk about how we re-envision policing in a way that isn't as militaristic as we've seen it evolve into in recent decades."

Regardless of defunding the police efforts, Ulrey said: "More money needs to be devoted to the investigation of elder abuse cases, by law enforcement, by APS and other local, state and federal agencies. More money needs to go to prevention efforts, to elder abuse victim services, to the ombudsman's office and to the many other agencies that are devoted to preventing and responding to elder abuse."

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