

'Defund the police' is not a serious — or a safe — solution

BY JAMES M. CASEY, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 06/10/20 05:00 PM EDT
THE VIEWS EXPRESSED BY CONTRIBUTORS ARE THEIR OWN AND NOT THE VIEW OF THE HILL

630 COMMENTS

286 SHARES



SHARE



TWEET



Just In...



© Getty Images

The Minneapolis City Council plans to vote to disband the city's police department as part of the ongoing fallout from the death of George Floyd. Other cities across the nation, including New York and Los Angeles, have proposed similar or less drastic measures, including budget cuts and redeployment of resources from the police to social and youth programs. Washington, D.C., Mayor Muriel Bowser amped up the rhetoric by having city workers paint "Black Lives Matter" in large yellow letters on a street leading to the White House, to which activists added "Defund the Police."

There have been a lot of raw feelings across the nation since Floyd's death in police custody on May 25. Several firings, resignations or charging of

police have occurred during the protests, but the reflexive move to defund or disband police forces is delusional.

Many of the country's major city police departments already are, de facto, partially defunded by critical shortages of personnel. Almost all of them cannot attract and keep qualified candidates when they are hiring. The job site Indeed.com shows more than 5,000 current openings. Before the current protests, when someone called 911 in a big city, the average wait time for a police officer's arrival varied from 5 to 13 minutes, because of manpower shortages.

For non-emergencies, it may be hours before police can respond — or they may not respond. The problem goes back years and can be attributed to numerous factors, including the perceived war on the police.

So far this year, 97 police officers have died in the line of duty nationwide. A retired police captain in St. Louis was among 17 people who have died in the unrest following Floyd's death. In 2016 in Dallas, a sniper shot police officers, killing five and wounding seven and two civilians. In this age of active shooters — 28 incidents in 2019 alone — police response has changed because officers may not have the luxury of rallying SWAT teams to deal with dangerous situations. The first officer on the scene must buck up and run to the sound of gunfire. In short, who wants to do this job anymore?

Cities calling for the disbanding or defunding of police forces are discussing the concept of utilizing a safety officer or social worker to deal with crime. This is not a new idea; cities have deployed social workers and mental health professionals before, but they must do so along with — not

instead of — the police because of the dangerous nature of many calls. Broadly speaking, there are four general categories of calls to the police: actual crimes, some violent, including traffic offenses; substance abuse; mental health; and nuisance calls (such as barking dogs).

Disband the police, and nobody responds to the first category of calls. The second and third often require a police officer's presence because of the propensity for violence or criminal acts. The fourth could be accomplished by a community service officer, which some departments have. Most social workers and mental health professionals do not sign up for careers that include being dispatched into dangerous situations, sometimes in the middle of the night. For those interested in what a society without a proper police response to crime looks like, there are plenty of examples — the anarchy in Somalia, Venezuela and portions of Mexico come to mind.

Media commentators claim that the “few bad apples” analogy does not cut it anymore regarding police reforms, but the videos and anecdotal reports of police officers behaving badly during the recent U.S. protests truly are not emblematic of the roughly 700,000 sworn officers in more than 12,000 local police departments who honorably protect their communities every day in America.

Sir Robert Peel, who established the London Metropolitan Police Force in 1829 and became known as the “Father of Modern Policing,” taught that “The police are the public and the public are the police.” What he meant was the police cannot be an occupying force separate and apart from the citizens they serve. And this is true; they are and need to be citizen-servants and protectors. What is also true is that police officers come to us from all sorts of families, carrying the same burdens off duty as “the people” they look out for. Millions of Americans have mental health issues, some of them psychotic. A 2014 survey found that 10 percent go to work high, after smoking marijuana. No one is immune from mental health problems, family problems, substance abuse risks, or financial, medical and spiritual issues — the police are the people.

The mantra “Defund the police” is not a serious proposal and needs to stop. No community in the country could go 24 hours without police.

James M. Casey was a police officer and FBI agent for 32 years. He served on the National Security Council in 2004-2005, and retired as the Special Agent in Charge of the FBI’s Jacksonville Division in 2012. He is president of FCS Global Advisors, a private investigative and crisis management firm.