

Why the \$6 Billion N.Y.P.D. Is Now a Target of ‘Defund the Police’

The New York police have taken on a vast purview beyond crime fighting that includes schools and mental health. Officials are now rethinking that.



Calls to “defund the police” have resonated with the City Council, where the speaker has proposed cutting \$1 billion from the Police Department’s \$6 billion budget. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

When someone in the grip of a mental health emergency behaves erratically in [New York City](#), it is the [Police Department](#) that is often called in. When there are serious disciplinary problems in the schools, or when homeless people are found sleeping in the subways, police officers are asked to take over.

The Police Department’s purview is so vast that elite officers trained for hostage situations sometimes find themselves assigned to animal control duties, chasing a runaway deer through the Bronx or corralling an escaped boa constrictor, as they did

recently at the height of the coronavirus pandemic.

For decades, a succession of city governments have turned to the department as a catchall fix for many of society’s ills, outside of traditional crime-fighting. That has meant deploying a force of 36,000 officers with a paramilitary approach that at times can be unnecessarily confrontational.

Now, after weeks of protests against police brutality spurred by the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, a political movement

has gathered momentum to curtail the [New York](#) Police Department's size and mission creep.

Calls to “defund the police” [have resonated with the City Council](#), where the speaker has proposed cutting \$1 billion from the department's \$6 billion budget and reducing the uniformed force. Protesters and others have demanded that cuts go further, and have put up an encampment in City Hall Park.

These tensions are now coming to a head in budget negotiations between the Council and Mayor Bill de Blasio, who has not expressed support for deep cuts in the police budget. The budget deadline is July 1.

The police commissioner, Dermot F. Shea, has said that he supports shifting some funding from his department to youth programs and that he is open to giving up ancillary functions the police have absorbed, like school safety and traffic enforcement.

But he has contended that drastic cuts to the number of uniformed officers are unwise given a recent rise in violent crime and will deprive high-crime areas of vital policing services. “The people you're trying to help the most, potentially I believe, you are going to hurt the most,” [Mr. Shea said in an interview with PIX11](#).



Protesters, some of whom have set up an encampment at City Hall Park, and others have demanded that cuts go further. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Demands to shrink the footprint of the Police Department — together with other requests, like to increase transparency in the disciplinary process — are coming from many quarters.

Hundreds of educators signed an open letter to Richard A. Carranza, the chancellor of the city's Department of Education, demanding that school safety officers, who are unarmed, be removed from buildings.

Black and Latino students still represent roughly 90 percent of arrests and summonses in city schools, though overall numbers of arrests have declined sharply under Mayor de Blasio.

And as police shootings have continued, a coalition of 80 mental health organizations has declared that a multimillion-dollar training initiative had failed. The program has so far given half the officers on the force [40 hours of training in handling encounters with people suffering mental health emergencies](#).

Since the program was implemented in 2015, 16 people with mental illness have been killed in encounters with New York City police, a higher rate than before the training started, said Carla Rabinowitz from Community Access, an advocacy group that has worked with the Police Department to expand mental health training for officers.

Just last week, [a man with a history of mental illness was killed](#) in Queens when police officers shocked him repeatedly with Tasers.

“Forty hours of training can't counter the police mentality; it can't counter the police values,” Ms. Rabinowitz said. “When someone calls for help, they need help. They don't need someone with a gun pointed at them.”

All but one of those 16 people with mental illness killed by the police were people of color, Ms. Rabinowitz added.

And in the subway, heavy-handed arrests of turnstile jumpers and officers' efforts to clear sleeping homeless people from train cars

— both of which disproportionately affect black and Hispanic people — have long been criticized by advocacy groups.

No police department should be invested with all these responsibilities, said Jumaane Williams, the city’s public advocate. Too often, he said, a law enforcement approach exacerbates a problem, particularly in black and Hispanic communities that receive outside attention from the police.

“The only tools they have are handcuffs, a gun, a baton and a summons book,” Mr. Williams said in an interview. “That’s always going to be a disaster when you have disparate policing depending on the community you’re in.”

A catchall solution



“If they want to shift responsibilities reasonably, do it,” said Patrick Lynch, president of the police officers’ union. “But where are you going to put it? Who’s going to do it?”. Gregg Vigliotti for The New York Times

[At a recent news conference](#), Patrick Lynch, president of the police officers’ union, said it was the failures of other city agencies that forced the department to take on many additional duties.

“If they want to shift responsibilities reasonably, do it,” Mr. Lynch said. “But where are you going to put it? Who’s going to do it? When you fail, who are you going to ask to step up? I got the answer. They’re going to come back and give it to the P.D.”

Even critics of the department acknowledge that there is some truth in his assessment.

In the late 1990s, amid concern over the Education Department’s vetting of its school safety force, [the police were called in to take over security in the schools](#).

As mental health institutions closed down or were deprived of funding through the 1970s, ’80s and ’90s, the department was called on to respond to emergencies and engage with the flood of homeless people on the streets and in the subway.

In the city’s darkest days — during the crack epidemic and the period of runaway crime in the 1980s and early ’90s, and after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks — police officers were looked upon more favorably in many quarters.

The Police Department of today is the result of the expansion to meet the challenges of those eras. The city now has fewer than 400 homicides each year, though the size of the uniformed staff has changed little from the early 1990s, when there were more than 2,000 murders annually.

While few would argue that the terrorist threat has gone away completely, some elected officials and civil rights lawyers have questioned the need for the department’s vast and secretive intelligence-gathering apparatus. The Police Department, for instance, [has several liaison officers stationed abroad](#).

Even some defenders of the police acknowledge that civilian agencies were better suited to dealing with the mentally ill, the homeless and public health crises.

“Could some other agencies do that better?” said Chuck Wexler, executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum, a law enforcement policy nonprofit. “I think the answer is, in some cases, absolutely.”

“Structural, systemic and transformational change”

For decades, city leaders of all political persuasions, fearful of being blamed for a rise in crime, have been loath to pare back the Police Department, even as crime has fallen. Its budget has grown from \$3 billion in 2000 to \$5.7 billion today.

Mayor de Blasio, for instance, came to office in 2014 promising to overhaul the department and to end the practice of searching large numbers of young people in high-crime neighborhoods for weapons and drugs, which a judge found unconstitutional.

But the department grew under his tenure. When the coronavirus pandemic cratered the city's economy, it was education and youth programs that Mr. de Blasio cut when he released his proposed budget in April. He left the Police Department virtually untouched.

The mayor has shifted his stance in the face of recent protests, pledging some cuts that will free up money that can then be diverted to social programs, particularly in predominantly black and Hispanic neighborhoods. But he has not said how far he is willing to go.

The City Council speaker, Corey Johnson, and his allies said the time had come to sharply shrink the department's sphere of responsibility.



City Council Speaker Corey Johnson, right, appearing alongside Mayor Bill de Blasio, left, in March. Mr. Johnson wants to shrink the Police Department by 2,000 uniformed officers. Gabriela Bhaskar for The New York Times

Uniformed officers should not police schoolyards or provide security at homeless shelters, Mr. Johnson said in an interview. Nor, he said, should the department continue to rack up \$700 million in overtime payments, as it did last year.

Mr. Johnson has proposed shrinking the department by 2,000 uniformed officers.

“This is a moment of reckoning,” he said. “It is a moment of structural, systemic and transformational change, and that means redesigning what public safety looks like and it means not relying only on the N.Y.P.D.”

Police officials say that most of the budget goes to salary and overtime for people on patrol, and that there is no way to cut \$1 billion without deep layoffs, which they say would drive up response times in a period when crime is ticking upward.

Even some supporters of reining in the police have cautioned against going too far.

Councilman I. Daneek Miller, a Queens Democrat who is a co-chairman of the Black, Latino and Asian Caucus, said that he supported the council's proposal to cut a billion dollars from the police budget, but that it should not come at the expense of progress in relations between his district and the police.

“It would be irresponsible for me to dismiss all of the work the community had done with those precincts to get us to this point,” he said in an interview. “We're not where we want to be, but we're damn sure better than we were.”

The Police Department acts on its own

In the past, restrictions on the Police Department's authority have often come as a result of outside intervention, and often in the face of opposition from city leaders. Court orders, for instance, forced the city to drop its policy of “stop and frisk” and to limit



Police officers escorting protesters onto a bus after they were arrested during protests in Manhattan. Todd Heisler/The New York Times

its intelligence gathering in mostly Muslim neighborhoods.

Still, there are indications that the political climate may change the department's reluctance to back off aggressive enforcement strategies that its leaders have stuck with for decades, as crime has steadily dropped to levels not seen since the 1950s.

This month, Mr. Shea, the police commissioner, [announced that he would disband](#) and reassign 600 officers on plainclothes "anti-crime" teams, which for nearly two decades have focused on making gun arrests and proactively preventing violent crime.

Those teams have attracted a disproportionate number of misconduct complaints and have been involved in some of the city's most notorious police shootings.

"We welcome reform, but we also believe meaningful reform starts from within," Mr. Shea said. "This is a policy shift coming from me, personally."

Further changes to the department, however, will require other city agencies to begin shouldering the burden of public safety, said those who support reducing the role of the police.

Rory I. Lancman, chairman of the City Council's justice committee, said it would be easy to reduce number of officers to meet today's demands, but more difficult to teach other agencies to take over those roles and to do a better job.

"You can't get the police out of the Department of Education without reforming how the Department of Education ensures public safety," he said. "That's true for homeless services, mental health services, you name it."