

US: The Rush to Redefine “Defund the Police”

Tuesday 9 June 2020, by [GRANT Melissa Gira](#) (Date first published: 9 June 2020).

An abolitionist demand rose to mainstream prominence. Now every politician and cable news talking head is suddenly an expert.

Before Minneapolis protesters briefly occupied and then set fire to a police station, activists’ calls to defund the police were considered—including by some more institutionally minded criminal justice reformers—to be an impossibly radical demand. That was barely two weeks ago. Since, as those local protests in response to the police killing of George Floyd have spread across the country, they have carried this demand into [city council meetings](#), across [cable news desks](#). The political vision now being articulated has become a rebuke to those who say these protests are aimless or counterproductive. Here, organizers respond, is something concrete to do: [Take money away from the police](#).

“Defund the police” did not begin as the rallying cry of national uprisings, but it is now ubiquitous on the streets. On a sweltering afternoon-long march on Saturday, when protesters filled the length of Brooklyn Bridge for hours, sometimes two or three protesters, each with their own “Defund the Police” sign, would end up briefly in accidental formation. At the foot of the bridge, police closed in tighter formation, some with batons in hand, to the sounds of, “These racist-ass cops have got to go.” You could find “Defund the Police” at a fairly contemplative rally in Union Square, too, when a few hundred medical workers came out last Friday to applaud protesters at 7 p.m.—a reversal of the [usual nightly ritual](#)—and then took a knee on the wet pavement.

But then, almost as swiftly as the demand had spread, a swell of new voices—with apparently newly acquired expertise— moved in over the last few days to soothe the public: When Black Lives Matter and other activists, by now protesting in every state for days on end, say they want to defund the police, that’s not what they *really* mean.

Demands to defund the police have their roots in prison abolition, a political and social vision of a world without systems of criminal punishment. The broader public, including many in the media and elected officials, lacks the history and context—or political will—to hear this demand that way. As the call has rapidly spread to wider audiences, it has mutated, offering complex opportunities: both for new, uneasy political coalitions to advance the demand to defund and redistribute and a countervailing reactionary effort to suppress, distort, and strip the demand of its radical intention. In the latter case, this willful misinterpretation spans strategic conservative panic and liberal attempts to pacify. But the meaning of “defund the police” is clear when returned to the politics from which it was developed: As it concerns the police, abolitionism asks us to defund, disarm, and abolish. A call to defund can’t be isolated from the larger question of, *What are the police for?* “Instead of asking whether anyone should be locked up or go free,” abolitionist and scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore [asks](#), “why don’t we think about why we solve problems by repeating the kind of behavior that brought us the problem in the first place?”

As the momentum behind the demand grows, policymakers struggle to accept it at face value. When [asked](#) on Tuesday on *Good Morning America* about Trump's claims that Democrats want to defund the police, Democratic Senator Kamala Harris responded reassuringly, "It's just creating fear where none is necessary." As on her [appearance](#) Monday on *The View*, she declined to state, when asked directly whether she supports defunding the police. When asked about Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti's [plans](#) for the Los Angeles Police Department budget—redirecting the \$250 million intended to increase its budget to other city programs and cutting another \$150 million of its overall \$2 billion budget—she said she "applauds what he has done." But when asked if Joe Biden had the right idea in [not wanting to defund the police](#) and instead "to condition federal money on reforms," she answered, "Joe Biden believes that we need to reform the system, and I couldn't agree with him more." Her remarks keep Harris in the running for Biden's vice presidential pick; they are also, from an actually making policy standpoint, incoherent. They unnecessarily fog up what "defunding the police" clearly means on its face.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was at least [clear](#) on MSNBC that the Democrat's new Justice in Policing Act does not defund the police but then suggested, at the local level, perhaps there was a way to "shuffle some [law enforcement] money around." Addressing the demand to defund at that local level, elected officials have framed it as a matter of misinterpretation or hyperbole: Washington, D.C., Mayor Muriel Bowser [said](#) on CNN on Monday, "most people are saying that they want reform, and they want good policing"—that is to say, when her constituents tell her, "defund the police," she doesn't believe them. New York state Governor Andrew Cuomo [offered](#) a clear echo in his remarks Monday. "When they're saying 'defund the police,' what are they saying? They're saying we want fundamental basic change when it comes to policing—and they're right."

Analysts and mainstream publications have taken up the same game of translation. "So, having read and listened to the more serious arguments for 'defunding' (but not really defunding) the police, I think the term a lot of these folks should use is 'Reinvent' the police," Jonah Goldberg [pronounced](#) Tuesday. *The New York Times*, in a story about activists who want to defund and disband the Minneapolis Police Department, and a city council that has taken up this demand, bluntly [appraised](#) their demands like this: "Protesters' cries to defund or abolish the police are often not meant literally."

The Minneapolis group MPD150, along with the abolitionists whose work brought us to a moment in which "defund the police" is a demand being considered on soft-focus morning news shows, do mean it literally, though. They are explicitly working [toward](#) a "Police-Free Future." Before the police killing of Floyd, they and other Minneapolis-based groups [called](#) for an end to the police department. Not a reconfiguring, not an adjustment that is more judicious about where or when to dispense cops—an end. It's just new that public officials are actually responding. "This is a moment that's going to go down in history as a landmark in the police and prison abolition movement," Tony Williams, a member of MPD150, told *The Guardian*. "It's pretty clear the political will is here, and they can't stop it."

But there is a difference between rewriting activists' demands into something less radical and drawing a distinction between defunding and abolishing the police. It is correct not to confuse one with the other. "Defund" is part of an abolitionist project, but abolition is not necessarily a part of a project to defund police budgets. Some [proposals](#) to reduce police budgets by a certain percentage or dollar amount don't end with a world without police and prisons. Others are advanced by abolitionist groups who ultimately seek an end to the carceral state itself. But a line item in a city budget is not the only measure of what it means to defund the police. Well before getting to zero, reducing police budgets could mean reducing police violence or any interaction police have with the public that results in harm. It is a direct and therefore challenging tactic meant to prevent police from acting with impunity.

But what divestment and abolition have in common is not how much money police have or would not have, but how much power they have. In a world with “defunded” police who are still tasked with “essential safety work,” if police retain the power they have now, [policing as an institution](#) will remain intact. Critical Resistance, a national abolitionist organization, has worked for two decades to make these distinctions clear. Of a range of proposed police reform measures, like body cameras or [demilitarizing police](#), it [offers](#) a set of questions to help determine: Does this reform expand or chip away at the power of police? “[Does this reduce funding for police?](#)” is the first one. Activists may part ways significantly on specific proposals. But for now, in cities and small towns over the last two weeks, those activists seem united on the premise that police must be defunded. What happens after that will likely be a point of departure for these tenuously formed coalitions.

These are not abstract questions, as city councils across the country—in New York, in Washington, in Los Angeles, and in Minneapolis—are debating police budgets right now. It will become even more critical for policymakers, journalists, and the broader public to become fluent in asking questions like those formulated by Critical Resistance. On Sunday, [news](#) that the Minneapolis City Council had secured a veto-proof majority who pledged to disband the police broke and [spread](#) widely across social media and in the streets. But here’s how one council member who backed this measure [described](#) what the council really did: It called “to disband our police department and start fresh with a community-oriented, non-violent public safety and outreach capacity.” If police functions are redistributed across other city agencies, what does that look like? Policing is more than just cops; it’s a system that reproduces itself in other functions and contexts. After Camden, New Jersey, “disbanded” its police department seven years ago, as Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor [writes](#) in [From #blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation](#), the footprint of the police force expanded, firing 250 officers and hiring 411 new ones, along with 120 “civilian clerks.” In its first year, excessive force complaints still topped those of any other police department in the state. “Broken windows” policing escalated, with disorderly conduct summonses *increasing* by [43 percent](#).

There are a lot of reasons people are second-guessing the demand to defund the police. It’s a radical shift from current policy and creates opportunities for additional ruptures. More than just finding it difficult to imagine a world without police or prisons, many policymakers and media alike are deeply invested in maintaining and upholding those systems. Such experts feel they are justified in trying to correct the people—abolitionist scholars, black feminists, queer activists—who have long advanced this demand as part of a broader abolitionist politics. In these attempts to undermine the clarity of activist demands, what we are seeing is an act of discipline. Another way to say that is, it is an act of trying to restore order.

Melissa Gira Grant is a staff writer at *The New Republic* and the author of *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work*.

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

The New Republic

<https://newrepublic.com/article/158104/rush-redefine-defund-police>