POLICING WITHOUT THE POLICE?
A Review of the Evidence

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Executive Summary

In the wake of the death of George Floyd and the summer of protests and riots that followed, left-wing activists and politicians have called not simply for reforms to policing, but for its abolition. In order to eliminate the possibility of wrongful killing of civilians, these advocates say, we should defund police departments, reroute their budgets to social services, and replace beat cops with unarmed civilian alternatives wherever possible.

In the first half of this brief, I outline why such proposals would be a disaster for public safety. In short, they:

✓ Have little basis in evidence;

✓ Would increase the risk posed to civilian employees;

✓ Would diminish the crime-reduction benefits of current police work; and

✓ Would have little impact on the size, and therefore effect, of social welfare spending.

While replacing the police is a misguided idea, that does not mean that lawmakers should dismiss altogether the idea of nonpolice crime-fighting tools. Indeed, there are several evidence-based, effective means to mitigate crime through channels other than more police work. These complementary tools can help relieve stress on overtaxed and understaffed police forces.

In the second half of this report, I lay out the evidence behind three options:

✓ Reducing crime through changes to the built environment, such as cleaning up vacant lots and green public spaces;

✓ Using "nonpolice guardians," such as neighborhood watches and CCTV cameras, to extend the police's reach;

✓ Targeting problematic alcohol use, a major cause of crime.

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Introduction: Moving Forward from "Defund the Police"

In the wake of the death of George Floyd and the summer of protests and riots that followed, police reform has once again caught the nation's attention. But whereas past cycles of this debate have focused on changes to the police as an institution—antibias trainings, new use-of-force policies, or adoption of body cameras, for example[1]—the loudest voices now push a more radical program: defund police departments, reroute their budgets to social services, and replace beat cops with unarmed civilian alternatives wherever possible. The idea is not to reform the police but to replace them.

These proposals originated in left-wing activist communities but have obtained surprising purchase among municipal leaders. NYC comptroller and mayoral contender Scott Stringer called for redirecting funds away from the New York Police Department (NYPD) and toward "trained social workers, counselors, and outreach staff." The L.A. City Council proposed replacing police with crisis response teams for "nonviolent" calls, and San Francisco Mayor London Breed said in June that police would no longer respond to "noncriminal" complaints.[2] These proposals are dramatically unpopular—defunding was regularly opposed by large majorities in polls[3]—but that has not dissuaded city councils from Minneapolis to Seattle from pushing to replace their police departments with "holistic," "public health"-oriented alternatives.[4]

There are, roughly speaking, two models of police defunding that have been proposed. Some have suggested shifting police duties to other—presumably unarmed—public employees, such as social workers. Others suggest rerouting police funding to welfare, education, and other social services meant to target the "root" causes of crime. Both envision a world in which crime can be prevented without the possibility of wrongful killing of civilians—and where order can be maintained without force.

In the first half of this report, I outline why policymakers should not be so sanguine at the prospect of replacing the police, either with unarmed municipal officials or through the redirection of police funding. In short, civilian "alternatives" both stand on shaky evidentiary ground and, more important, are not well suited to the fundamental function of stopping crime. The efficacy of redirecting police funding to social services, meanwhile, runs afoul of basic budget math: the roughly 3% of government dollars spent on policing every year would be just a drop in the bucket of major social welfare programs but would be devastating to the communities deprived of policing.

At the same time, there is plainly a desire among policymakers for proven crime-prevention methods that could complement police work. That desire is political, responding, as it does, to the concerns of the thousands who took to the streets last summer. But it is also practical, insofar as municipal leaders have an interest in reducing crime in the most effective way possible. Although the "alternatives or police" approach of defunders is untenable, many evidence-based, effective tools to mitigate crime through channels other than more police work are available. The police, after all, are just a part of the broader schema of public safety.[5] City officials can pursue

a "both/and" approach by complementing the police rather than replacing them.

In pursuing this more positive both/and approach, it is important to focus on policies that have actually been shown to be effective in reducing crime, not to simply make vague promises for more spending on a wide variety of social services. In the second half of this report, I lay out the evidence behind three options:

- Reducing crime through changes to the built environment, such as cleaning up vacant lots and green public spaces

- Using "nonpolice guardians," such as neighborhood watches and CCTV cameras, to extend the police's reach

- Targeting problematic alcohol use, a major cause of crime

This report intends to move the conversation about alternatives to the police in a more fruitful direction. Defunding and replacing the police, the key institution of American public safety, is a nonstarter. But we can support the police's mission through other tools, managing public safety and order through more than just law enforcement.

The Follies of Replacing the Police

To a concerning extent, American city leaders have bought in to the police-defunding movement. Politicians, particularly in progressive-controlled cities, have slashed budgets, reduced roles, and installed new civilian alternatives in their place.[6] In New York, for example, Mayor Bill de Blasio cut $350 million from the NYPD's budget to reallocate to education, mental-health, and homeless services. The mayor also disbanded the department's plainclothes anticrime unit, while emphasizing his continued support for "violence interrupters" as a "root-of-the-problem" alternative to the police.[7]

Civilian Alternatives for Fighting Crime

Much of the contemporary dispute around policing comes down to highly publicized use of force, deadly or otherwise, particularly against black or disabled citizens. Insofar as policing is distinguished, in part, by the legal right to use force in certain circumstances, advocates of defunding argue that successful reform—read: a reduction in use of (deadly) force—requires replacing police with unarmed civilian municipal employees who will combat crime through any number of proposed techniques.

To be sure, precedent exists for civilians supporting police officers in crime reduction. As far back as 1968, the federal government provided funding for police departments to hire social workers through the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration.[8] Today, many cities have addiction counselors, social workers, and "violence interrupters" who work alongside the police to control crime.[9]

Surprisingly, little evidence supports the crime-fighting efficacy of many of these alternatives, especially when compared with the robust evidence base supporting cops' effect on crime. Limited evidence supports some of these programs—all of which exist alongside police departments—and not nearly enough evidence suggests that the programs would be able to replace police altogether.

Consider de-escalation training. De-escalation entails the use of verbal and nonverbal tools to defuse a potentially violent or dangerous situation. Teaching de-escalation to police officers is relatively uncontroversial and has appeared in numerous "police reform" legislative proposals.[10] Some advocates of defunding have argued that professional de-escalators could mitigate violence before it occurs, rather than reacting to violence, as police do.

Despite widespread support, scant evidence shows that de-escalation works. A systematic review of decades of research found essentially no high-quality study to support de-escalation.[11] In a survey of 64 studies, the authors find that most of the research conducted on de-escalation is not of a sufficiently robust experimental design to infer causality (i.e., to claim that de-escalation training led to the measured outcomes). Moreover, many of the studies were conducted on the use of de-escalation by nurses and those who work with the mentally ill—zero studies were identified pertaining to criminal justice. Many did not even measure the actual effect on the incidence of violence but only how subjects feel about de-escalation after training. Where studies do measure outcomes, the results are inconsistent: sometimes, the number of violent incidents decreased; in others, there was either an increase or no effect.

Preliminary evidence from a well-designed study conducted by the authors of an analysis with the Louisville Police Department suggests that de-escalation training reduces use of force, but the durability of those effects and the external validity of the findings remain unclear. Importantly, even if de-escalation can be helpful when used by police officers, we cannot infer that de-escalators alone could be a substitute for the police.[12] Anecdotally, de-escalation techniques are frequently forgotten in the high-stress situations that policing entails, suggesting that civilians would be left ill-equipped to manage such situations.[13]

Similar problems plague Crisis Intervention Team training, a set of practices meant to mitigate the risks in police interactions with people with mental or sub-stance-abuse disorders. Individuals with CIT training could conceivably "take over" for police in such cases. Yet, just as with de-escalation, CIT's efficacy is unclear. A systematic review of research on the practice found that while it improved police officers' subjective well-being, it had no impact on "objective measures of arrests, officer injury, citizen injury, or use of force."[14]

Real-world evidence shows both the effectiveness and limits of CIT. Eugene, Oregon, has for over three decades run CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets), a nonprofit-administered program that deploys unarmed CITs to deal with crises involving "mental illness, homelessness, and addiction."

But CAHOOTS responders are highly specialized. In 2019, they covered just 17% of Eugene 911 calls,[15] with 75% of those calls being a welfare check, providing transportation to someone (usually homeless or in need), or assisting the police already on the beat. Even in those relatively limited circumstances, CAHOOTS responders still called for backup in roughly one in every 67 calls for service in 2019.[16]

It is hard to see that model scaling up to cover the other 83% of 911 calls to the Eugene PD. Doing so would involve not only dramatically scaling up CAHOOTS's $2.1 million budget but also identifying a large population of trained CIT professionals and, most significantly, asking those professionals to handle situations that grow increasingly risky as responsibility expands. In other words, though it doubtless provides a useful service now, groups like CAHOOTS are not a model for how to replace the police. But as a complement to policing, it may be a useful model for other cities to adopt.

Perhaps the most promising alternative practices are "violence interrupters," who—following the "Cure Violence" framework developed by Dr. Gary Slutkin—work in high-crime areas (where they often also live) to identify and diffuse potentially violent situations or feuds before they escalate into conflict. The practice has been implemented in more than 25 cities, including New York and Chicago.[17] Advocates like sociologist Patrick Sharkey have argued that interrupters could play a key role in fighting violent crime without armed police officers and have called for greater experimentation with such substitutions.[18]

But the actual evidence supporting Cure Violence, while promising, is less robust than would be necessary for the program to be a viable replacement for the police. A National Institute of Justice analysis of Chicago's program, for example, found that Cure Violence reduced shootings in three of the seven neighborhoods studied—but gun homicides in just one and gang homicides in none.[19] In a study in New York City, Cure Violence reduced shooting victimizations in only one of two neighborhoods.[20] In a Pittsburgh pilot program which included violence interrupters, rates of homicide, aggravated assault, and gun assault all rose following implementation.[21] In short, the evidence sug- gests that Cure Violence can be useful, and a violence interruption program is likely a beneficial addition to traditional police work, but there's little reason to believe that one can replace the other.

The bar for replacing the police is particularly high because there is very strong evidence supporting cops' crime-fighting efficacy. Research using the surge in police funded by the 1994 Crime Bill, for example, found that adding one cop per 10,000 people reduced violent crimes by 3.7%, robberies by 5%, murders by 3.2%, and burglaries by 2.2%.[22] Another study examining the same federal funding source during the Great Recession found that a 3.6% increase in police cut violent crimes by 4.8% and property crimes by 3%.[23] Research using changes in the terror alert level on the National Mall found that periods of high police presence slashed crime substantially,[24] while evidence from beat cops in Dallas found that a 10% decrease in police presence led to a 7.4% increase in crime in a given beat.[25]

These are just a few of the many studies that causally link the level of police to the level of crime. This is perhaps why in a survey just a month after the onset of protests last summer, 86% of all Americans and 81% of

black Americans said that they would want the police to spend the same length of time or longer in their neighborhoods—they don't want less policing.[26]

In order to be viable replacements, alternative civilians would need to have similar levels of efficacy, meaning that they would need to provide the same or larger crime-reducing effects, absent the presence of police officers. But even working alongside police officers, they do not, which suggests that a largely or exclusively alternative police force would be a poor substitute.

Even if the evidence for civilian alternatives were not so underwhelming, there would be good reason for skepticism about expanding the scope of these programs. Police work is dangerous; and it is far from obvious that civilian alternatives are prepared to shoulder the risks and duties that it entails entirely on their own.

Advocates of defunding tend to envision reducing the police role only to those situations that call for the use of force, neatly distributing all other functions to unarmed alternatives. Yet the nature of policing—interacting with people and situations not bound by the usual rules of polite conduct—does not allow for such an easy assessment of risk.

Consider the case of traffic enforcement. Some have proposed that traffic cops should be systematically disarmed, and the city of Berkeley, California, has even taken steps to do so, reasoning that traffic stops account for a large share of police shootings, particularly of black people.[27] But traffic stops can be dangerous for the police, too: of the 257 police officers feloniously killed between 2015 and 2019, 16 were killed during traffic violation stops—more than during arrests, crimes in progress, or in unprovoked attacks.[28] An unarmed traffic cop, in other words, is being asked to bear risk without the means to mitigate it.

Other nominally "safe" police tasks carry risk, too. Social workers, whom some defunders envision replacing police, have been killed by clients while filling the exact role envisioned for them.[29] Such events may be rare, but their infrequency must be weighed against the severity of the harm. Police do not often draw their weapons—just 27% of officers have ever discharged their firearms, and just 0.3% of use-of-force incidents involve a gun being drawn or fired—but they are armed precisely for the set of circumstances where the potential costs are highest.[30]

What advocates of civilian alternatives propose to do, in effect, is send individuals into these same circumstances without the capacity to defend themselves in worst-case scenarios. The risk of violence is not routine

or predictable, and the point of empowering police with the means to physically keep the peace—the fundamental function of a state—is to allow them to manage those unpredictable situations. One cannot simply wave such situations away; they are a fundamental part of why we have a law-enforcement apparatus.

Advocates for replacing the police risk losing some of the public safety gains afforded by routine enforcement. As is true of many social phenomena, a large share of crime is committed by a disproportionately small share of the population—one review finds that roughly 10% of the most criminally active people account for 66% of all offenses.[31] Serious offenders tend to commit less serious offenses as well, and enforcement against the latter is an opportunity to deter serious offenses or identify those who have committed them post hoc. When, for example, New York MTA officers targeted fare evaders in the 1990s, they found that one out of seven fare evaders had an open warrant, and one in 21 was carrying a weapon.[32] A transition away from policing would increase the number of crimes committed by those otherwise deterred by such enforcement.

Reallocating Police Funding to Reduce Crime

The second common defunding proposal is to reallocate police budgets to social services, welfare, or other policies that target "root causes" of crime. Proponents of this view tend to point to the large share of city budgets allocated to policing—as much as 50% in cities such as Los Angeles.[33] This money, they argue, could be redirected to schools, housing, education, and even reparations for black residents—all of which would allegedly do more than the police do to reduce crime, ameliorate inequality, and minimize violent death.[34]

Yet analysis of municipal budgets obscures, intentionally or otherwise, the actual scale and dynamics of police funding. Policing remains one of the few institutions in American life predominantly governed at the local level, and the 18,000 police departments in the U.S. have "no universal standard for the structure, size, or governance."[35] They are also predominantly funded by the cities they serve—an Urban Institute analysis found that as of 2017, policing accounts for 13% of municipal spending but just 1% of state spending and about 6% of local spending (which includes not only municipal but county, township, and school district spending).[36]

City budgets, in other words, offer only a partial view of spending priorities. More comprehensive figures fur-

nished by the Bureau of Economic Analysis show that state and local governments together spent $143.7 billion on policing in 2019, about 4.9% of all spending. The federal government, meanwhile, spends roughly $48.4 billion, roughly 1% of its outlays. The total $192 billion bill equals about 2.7% of all spending across all levels of government.[37]

The sum of $192 billion may sound like a lot, but it is small potatoes compared with what is already spent on the government functions to which defunders would like to see that money rerouted. Total government spending on education is roughly $1.02 trillion, while income security payments—disability, retirement, welfare and social services, and unemployment—totaled $1.6 trillion even before the coronavirus pandemic; health spending totaled $1.7 trillion.[38] Across all levels of government, spending on police totals roughly 0.9% of GDP, compared with 33% of GDP spent across all budget functions.[39]

This spending offers taxpayers a lot of bang for their buck: one estimate finds that each added dollar in spending on police offered an additional $1.63 in saved costs to crime victims.[40] These benefits accrue more to black Americans, who are disproportionately likely to be the victims of crime, with the per-capita homicide-reduction effects of police officers estimated to be twice for blacks what they are for whites.[41]

In other words, if all levels of government defunded police comprehensively, the increase in funding for other services would be a drop in the bucket compared with what is already spent—hardly the social revolution that defunders promise. And it would come at enormous cost to public safety, a cost borne disproportionately by the least advantaged Americans.

Complements to the Police: What the Research Supports

While replacing the police is a misguided idea, that does not mean that lawmakers should dismiss altogether the idea of nonpolice crime-fighting tools. One of the many follies of the defund movement has been to impose the previously mentioned either/or paradigm, forestalling healthy discussion of "both/and" approaches. Complementary tools not only offer city leaders a way to mollify constituents worried about both the police and crime; they also help relieve stress on overtaxed and understaffed police forces,

allowing them to better focus on making the greatest contribution possible to fighting crime.

In the remainder of this report, I review several evidence-based policies that can complement policing in the broader agenda of controlling crime. Just a few options among many, these are selected with an eye toward both cost-efficiency and ease of implementation. I avoid discussions of proposals to reduce crime in the long run through, e.g., early childhood interventions or poverty reduction. Although evidence exists for some of these interventions, my goal is to offer policymakers faster, less complicated, and more budget-savvy tools.[42]

To that end, I will discuss three complements to policing that can help reduce violent crime: first, improvements to the built environment, such installing streetlights, clearing vacant lots, greening public spaces, and installing alley gating; second, the creation of nonpolice "guardians" to surveil public spaces, like CCTV cameras and neighborhood watch groups; and third, stricter control of alcohol use—which is strongly associated with crime—by stronger enforcement of current laws, targeting places and times where and when use is most problematic, and using proven programs to reduce problem use. All these proposals are backed by solid research and offer plausible, cost-effective approaches to helping police in their fundamental duties of stopping crime and keeping public order.

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design

As far back as the work of pioneering urbanist Jane Jacobs, theorists of crime and the city have argued that the built environment can encourage or discourage criminal offending. Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) is the school of thought dedicated to identifying urban-planning strategies that mitigate crime. There are a number of CPTED-inspired, cost-effective, research-supported, and crime-reducing interventions that city leaders should consider adding to their arsenal.

One simple, likely effective, intervention is repairing, expanding, and increasing the quality of street lighting. Streetlights may deter crime by making otherwise secluded areas more public and thus less conducive to crime, increasing civilians' sense of safety, establishing

a more orderly built environment, and helping facilitate community self-surveillance, even at nighttime.

The effect of streetlights on crime has been a subject of controversy since the 1980s, partly driven by contradictory results, often from low-quality studies.[43] A comprehensive review of the literature conducted in 2002 found that streetlights reduced crime by an average of 20% but was limited by the quality of the evidence, which mostly incorporated retrospective analysis.[44] More recent evidence gives strong reason to believe in streetlights' efficacy for crime reduction.

In what is, to date, the only randomized trial of street lighting, a group of criminological researchers partnered with the New York City Mayor's Office, the NYPD, and the New York City Housing Authority to randomly distribute lighting in public housing across the city.[45] They found that added lighting reduced nighttime outdoor crime by up to 60%—or 36%, when spatial spillover effects were controlled for. These declines, the authors note, are roughly equivalent to the effects of a 10% increase in police manpower.

Other recent research suggests evidence of the efficacy of street lighting. Analysis of daylight saving time finds that an added hour of daylight reduces robberies by 7%, providing evidence of a causal link between light and crime.[46] An analysis of block-level streetlight outages in Chicago found that they caused crime spillovers into adjacent blocks, suggesting that effective streetlights can help control crime in adjacent areas.[47] And survey evidence indicates that brighter streetlights increase feelings of public safety, which may, in turn, reduce crime.[48]

Even assuming limited efficacy, the low cost of streetlights relative to other interventions means that they are a highly cost-efficient option for city leaders looking to reduce crime. One analysis based on data from England estimated that the financial savings afforded by crime reduction exceeded the cost of installing the lights by a factor of 2.4 to 10.[49] Research done in Glasgow, Scotland, also found that added streetlights saved money, on net, by reducing crime.[50]

Other changes to the built environment have been shown to have substantial anticrime effects. The restoration of vacant lots is associated not only with reductions in crime, gun violence, burglary, and nuisances, but it also lowers nearby residents' fear of crime.[51] There are also substantial possible returns: one analysis, looking at the effect of restoring blighted buildings and vacant lots in Philadelphia, found that taxpayers received $5 in cost savings for every dollar spent on abandoned building restoration and $26 for

every dollar spent on vacant lot remediation.[52]

Vacant lots can play a role in another CPTED intervention: planting trees, plants, and otherwise greening public areas, which make environments more welcoming and inviting to a community—which, in turn, encourages self-policing. The conversion of lots in Youngstown, Ohio, into community gardens significantly reduced assaults, burglaries, robberies, and theft in the surrounding area.[53]

The principle extends to greening public areas generally. In one study, otherwise similar apartment buildings with more greenery saw fewer property and violent crimes than those with less greenery.[54] Another study used the spread of a common tree pest as a variable to show that a decline in tree cover corresponds to an increase in crime—suggesting that greening urban spaces would inversely cut offenses.[55] Such interventions are relatively cost-effective: NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg's "Million Trees" initiative was estimated to have returned $5.60 for every $1 invested.[56]

Community members can reduce crime by more effectively controlling access to crime-prone areas. For example, many cities have complex networks of alleys between buildings that offer ripe opportunities for crime. Alley gating, a practice popular in the United Kingdom, entails blocking off alleys with locked steel or iron gates. A comprehensive review of studies of alley gating found that it cut burglaries nearly in half, on average, an indicator that even a simple intervention such as installing a gate can have major impacts on crime.[57]

CPTED-inspired interventions such as these can have large effects—vacant lot clearance, for example, reduced gun violence by nearly 30% in the Philadelphia study[58]—making them a powerful tool in any policymaker's arsenal. But they suffer from one obvious drawback: the improvements they offer are generally one-time deals. Trees can be planted only once, vacant lots cleared only once, and alley gates or more lighting installed only once. While cities doubtless have myriad opportunities to make such improvements, they should not imagine that one-time investments can solve their crime problem.

Nonpolice Guardians

Police affect crime in two ways: by responding to crimes after the fact (through investigation, arrest, etc.); and by simply being present in an area where a crime might otherwise occur, thereby deterring a would-be criminal

from offending in the first place. This deterrent effect of police presence is a key reason to preserve, and even expand, existing police forces. But it is also a reason to complement police with nonpolice "guardians" who can work similarly. Such actors can both reduce crime and free up valuable police resources to focus on increasing clearance rates. This section reviews evidence on two possible interventions: neighborhood watches and Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) cameras.

Neighborhood watches enlist civilian residents to monitor their neighborhoods for crimes and report them to the police. Such groups may deter crime by several means: increasing arrest rates; discouraging criminals from acting because they know that someone might be watching; and through other mechanisms of informal social control. Because neighborhood watch programs comprise volunteers, the cost is small by comparison with paying more professionals.

Regardless of how they work, neighborhood watches are proven crime fighters. A 2008 review of U.K. and U.S. research covering 43 neighborhood watch programs estimated that they reduced crime by 16%–26%, compared with control areas.[59] In Medford, Oregon, an added neighborhood watch decreased the crime rate per "beat" on which they worked by 3%, although there were diminishing marginal returns as the number of discrete watches

in an area rose.[60] In Seattle, neighborhood watches that focused on crime hot spots had some success—911 calls fell at one treatment site while disorder fell at another, indicating a plausible, if small, effect.[61]

The logic behind using CCTV cameras for surveillance of public spaces is similar. Such cameras are in widespread use; roughly half of police departments were deploying them as of 2013.[62] They are thought to prevent crime through deterrence but also by increasing clearance and facilitating community surveillance. Such technology has grown increasingly cheap in recent years—in 1995, installing a highway CCTV camera could run from $30,000 to $100,000;[63] by 2015, open-source options could be had for as little as $75 a unit.[64]

One recent review of some 40 years of research concluded that the use of CCTV cameras is associated with "a [statistically] significant and modest decrease in crime," roughly a 13% drop in areas surveilled by cameras compared with control areas.[65] In particular, CCTV cameras drove large crime reductions in parking lots (37%) and a small reduction in residential areas (12%) but no significant effects in city and town centers, housing complexes, and public transit. They also significantly reduced drug, vehicle, and property crime but not violent crime or public disorder.

Evidence exists that CCTV cameras can increase clearance rates by making it easier for police to identify and therefore apprehend offenders. In the case of transit crime on New South Wales's rail system, cases in which police requested CCTV footage were 21% more likely to be cleared than those in which they did not.[66] In Dallas, the installation of CCTV cameras led to an increase in the clearance rates for thefts committed in the cameras' immediate proximity, although not for other types of crime.[67]

While cameras and neighborhood watches have a clear crime-reduction effect, they cannot operate alone. Watches must report crimes that they witness to the police, and CCTV cameras require police officers for the same function—if not to man them. These are tools for extending the knowledge and therefore enforcement/deterrence capacity of the police, not for replacing them.

Controlling Alcohol

A third, remarkably underdiscussed, channel for crime reduction is greater policy focus on controlling the adverse effects of substance consumption, particularly alcohol. This section focuses on alcohol rather than traditional hard drugs because the former is widely available and relatively uncontrolled, compared with other criminogenic substances (heroin, crack, etc.). In fact, one analysis of U.K. data concluded that alcohol was the most cumulatively harmful substance of some 14 considered, thanks largely to the ratio of its harmfulness to its availability.[68]

Alcohol is a major contributor to criminal offending. A 1998 Bureau of Justice Statistics study found that the offender had been drinking in one in three crimes that led to incarceration.[69] California arrest data show that those just over the age of 21 are 6% more likely to be arrested than those just under the age of 21,[70] while court data from Oregon indicate that people are more likely to commit assaults and alcohol-related nuisance crimes after they turn 21,[71] both indicating that access to legal alcohol significantly increases the risk of offending.

Yet this connection is rarely seen as an avenue for controlling crime—and city administrators are increasingly actively opposed to alcohol control. The coronavirus pandemic and ensuing explosion of outdoor dining have led some legislators to consider ending bans on public consumption.[72] "Progressive" prosecutors across the country—including in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Los Angeles—now refuse to prosecute public intoxication or open-container violations, arguing that they are

public-disorder offenses beyond their concern.[73]

Expanding alcohol control could have a significant impact on crime and other adverse outcomes. A 10% increase in alcohol excise taxes, for example, has been estimated to save 2,000–6,000 lives a year, while helping internalize the social costs of drinking and shore up government deficits.[74] Further taxing a legal and widely consumed substance may conflict with commitments to consumer liberty and a wariness of aggressive taxation, however, and some policymakers may therefore shy away from such a broad-based approach.

Luckily, effective alcohol control can also be attained with better enforcement and proven treatment, both targeted at the most problematic users and contexts. Alcohol consumption is highly concentrated—the top decile of drinkers, measured by volume consumed, account for more than half of all alcohol consumption in the U.S. in a given year.[75] Targeting the places and people most at risk for abuse is an effective way to deter crime while avoiding any effect on the majority of American adults who are able to drink responsibly.

Law enforcement and civil authorities could, for example, focus on more thoroughly enforcing preexisting laws. Roughly 30% of high schoolers report regularly drinking alcohol, which suggests that targeting liquor stores or other venues to ensure that they do not distribute to minors may mitigate crime risk.[76] Similarly, a stringently enforced alcohol-licensing regime may reduce crime: in England, jurisdictions with more aggressive requirements for obtaining alcohol licenses saw violent, sexual, and public-order crimes decline faster than their more permissive neighbors.[77]

Regulators could also carve around the edges of consumption, targeting contexts in which problem use is most likely. In the early 2000s, many of São Paulo's municipalities required bars to be closed in the late night and early morning hours; those that did saw a large relative reduction in homicides, assaults, and car crashes.[78] Similarly, the location of new bars and liquor stores determines their criminogenic effect: one study found that those storefronts led to higher levels of crime but that the risk was mitigated by placement in mixed-use zoning neighborhoods.[79]

One of the most effective and well-targeted interventions focuses on managing problem drinking directly. Since 2005, South Dakota has targeted problematic drinkers with its 24/7 Sobriety Program. Originally focused on DUI offenders, the program has been expanded so that those who commit alcohol-involved crimes can be compelled to enroll as a condition of their

bail, suspended sentence, or parole.[80] Program enroll-ees take a twice-daily Breathalyzer test or wear an al-cohol-monitoring bracelet. Those who test positive are subject to an immediate but brief punishment, usually a day or two in jail, in line with the "swift, certain, fair" model of corrections.[81]

Participation in 24/7 not only reduced DUI offenses but also slashed domestic violence arrests by 9%.[82] And because offenders receive a swift, certain, but brief pun-ishment, local municipalities save money on lengthy jail sentences: after Campbell County, Wyoming, im-plemented 24/7 Sobriety, Sheriff Scott Matheny esti-mated that it was saving over $11,000 a day.[83]

Such proposals may be deleterious to commercial (and tax) revenue. But well-designed alcohol-control policy may be worth the cost to the average citizen: alco-hol-involved crime was estimated to cost $84 billion a year in 1999, or $131 billion in 2021-adjusted dollars.[84] By focusing on the highest-risk offenders and locations for offense, better alcohol control can be a useful tool in supporting the police's crime-fighting mission.

Conclusion

The energy of last summer's protests has fizzled in the legislative process. Congress's police reform proposals were stopped by partisan gridlock, and even Minne-apolis's efforts to defund have ground to a halt amid rising crime and a shrinking police force.[85] In many senses, this is a positive development, insofar as many of the reforms on offer would have proved a disaster for public safety. But it has also foreclosed a potential-ly useful discussion about how cities can build a more comprehensive public safety apparatus that relies on a host of tools, including, but not limited to, the police, to keep streets orderly and citizens secure.

Such discussion was, to the extent that it happened at all, framed as a matter of opposing the police whole-sale and doing away with an institution often slandered as retrograde, unreliable, and racist to the root. Public safety—from crime and from police misconduct—was, as so many issues regrettably are, subsumed into the culture war, pushing participants to take an unnu-anced, all-or-nothing stance.

This is unfortunate, insofar as there is a great deal of merit to nonpolicing crime-reduction tools, considered not as replacements but as complements. The police remain the heart of American crime control, a well-de-served role based on their proven efficacy. But we know now that other tools can help in the battle against crime. A truly holistic vision of public safety retains policing at its core but incorporates these tools as well.

Although America has accomplished much in the way of crime control in the past quarter-century, there is much left to do. The crime decline has stalled out, clear-ance rates remain desperately low, and nearly 20,000 people still die by homicide every year.[86] Municipal, state, and federal leaders can and should respond to this reality with financial and political support for pro-fessional, informed, and effective policing. They should also consider other options, such as those outlined in this report—because they may, in this moment of po-litical controversy, prove more popular but also for the simple reason that they work. Doing so will be another step toward an America where every citizen exercises his right to live safe and free from the scourge of crime.
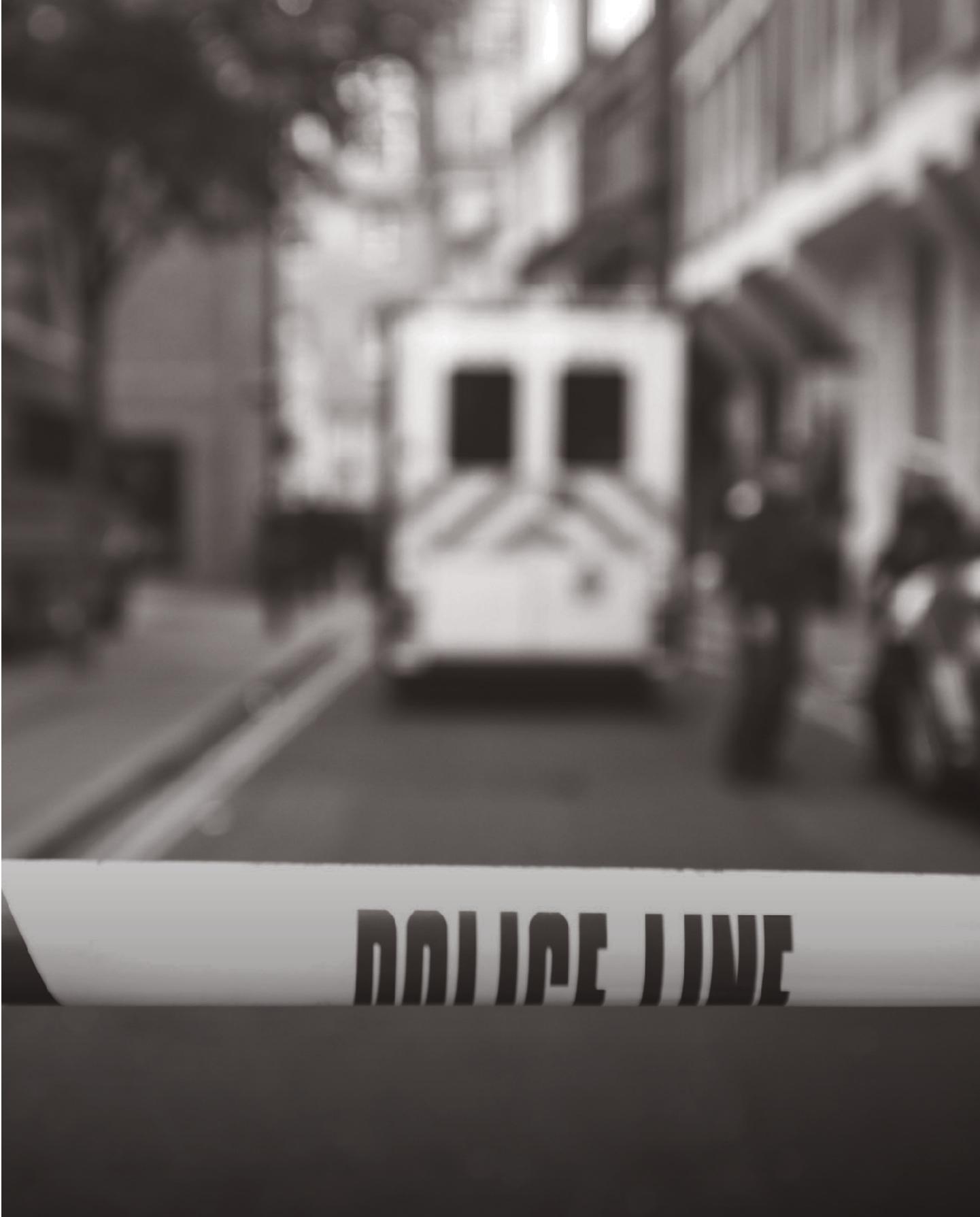
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