

The Times and Democrat

Defunding police is no answer

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The death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis, Minn., police has become the catalyst for a national movement seeking law enforcement reform. Calls for change extend from outlawing some police tactics to disbanding the police altogether.

It's time for cooler heads to prevail.

On the day before Floyd's funeral in Houston, that city's police chief, Art Acevedo, offered a dose of reality, saying getting rid of police departments is "an invitation to chaos." He called the defunding-police-to-invest-in-communities argument a false equivalence.

He's right. Defunding police under the guise of investing in other community needs is not an answer, and contrary to what national media reporting may lead you to believe, Americans agree.

Only 16% of Americans favor cutting funding for police departments, according to the Cato Institute Criminal Justice National Survey. Nine of 10 black, white and Hispanic Americans oppose reducing the number of police officers in their community -- and a third say their community needs more officers.

That's because most Americans of all races, colors and creeds realize police are necessary for enforcement in a nation of laws. Anyone believing otherwise should consider what they plan to do when an officer is needed and there is none to come.

But there is support for change. The Cato survey found:

- 79% of Americans back having outside law enforcement agencies investigate police misconduct, rather than leave it to the department to handle.
- 65% of Americans believe racial profiling is commonly used, but nearly the same share oppose it.
- 68% support de-escalation training for police to aid police officers during confrontations with citizens.
- 53% think local police departments using military weapons and armored vehicles "goes too far."
- 89% support the police wearing body cameras.
- 73% support a law requiring police officers to notify citizens when a stop is voluntary and they are free to decline a search.
- 54% favor treating drug offenses like minor traffic violations with small fines rather than as felonies.

- 84% support ending a practice called civil asset forfeiture in which police may take money or property of a person they suspect may have been involved in a crime before the person is convicted.

- 67% support banning neck restraints as a police tactic.

- 80% support implementing an early warning system to identify problematic officers.

Some of the changes are needed and likely forthcoming in the wake of the present national environment. But to the list, we have an important addition.

Instead of defunding the police, let's go the other direction and pay law enforcement officers more. It seems that Americans expect police to be the best among us at all times, but we don't put our money behind the expectations in attracting people to the profession.