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‘Defund the police’ is a bad slogan, but some aspects are worth considering

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As a branding idea, “Defund the Police” may be the worst slogan since New Coke, but as a policy matter, it is something most California communities should consider.

California spends more than \$41 billion on law enforcement at the state, county and municipal levels. This at a time when rates of violent crime are at historic lows. Even property crime, which has edged up in some jurisdictions such as San Francisco, remains extremely low.

Of course, no one is suggesting these communities zero out their policing entirely, but it raises questions about local priorities and how police are best deployed.

Law enforcement dispatching records show police being assigned tasks they are not equipped for – wellness checks, mental illness, drug overdoses, dealing with the homeless – on top of traffic accidents and citations. The Los Angeles Police Department’s dispatches throughout 2018 show that only 12% of dispatches were for violent crimes, compared to almost 40% for nonviolent complaints and 38% for property crimes.

Los Angeles’ police dispatches also reveal that, although only a small fraction of the total, almost 10,000 dispatches involved juveniles. Rather than sending police, it seems social workers or others with appropriate training should respond.

Ultimately, police are not equipped to deal with most non-criminal issues. Too often, police involvement turns otherwise non-violent situations deadly, as in the case of Stephon Clark, whose killing by Sacramento police spurred reforms to California’s police use of force law.

The officers who killed Clark were using a helicopter to track a suspect accused of breaking car windows. While theft and vandalism are obviously wrong, using deadly force and a helicopter to track low-level crime suspects can hardly be considered fiscally sound, let alone justice.

This is especially salient when new technologies give police myriad non-lethal options – why, then, does California’s default response to so many crimes involve lethal weapons?

Moreover, police response to non-criminal calls are more likely to occur in low-income or communities of color, which often aren’t equipped to deal with these problems through other

mechanisms. This causes ongoing friction between the community and a police force that often resembles an occupying army.

When people talk about defunding the police, they are suggesting that not every domestic disturbance, traffic mishap or truant youth needs to be confronted by someone resembling RoboCop. Mental health professionals and social service personnel – without guns – may well be better suited to dealing with non-violent, non-criminal situations.

Therefore, what “defund the police” really means is reducing police budgets, while transferring funds, where appropriate, to alternative programs and responses. Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti’s proposal for police reform is perhaps closer to the slogan, with funding for health, jobs and other programs paid for by cuts to LAPD’s budget. While the \$150 million from police budgets is more than half of the \$250 million he is proposing for new programs, it constitutes less than a tenth of the city’s \$1.7 billion fiscal year 2019 appropriation for policing.

In recent years, California has made tremendous strides toward criminal justice reform. The state has shifted away from incarceration, and crime remains low. Propositions 47 and 57 seem to be working. And, by legalizing recreational marijuana, California removed one source of over-criminalization. The state’s 2019 law reforming police standards for using deadly force is already a nationwide model, although it did not go as far as some reformers hoped. In some ways, California is a model for criminal justice reform nationwide.

Still, the state started with such a severely flawed system that reform is not done. Recent demonstrations are not just a reaction to events in Minneapolis, but to ongoing injustices and disparate treatment across California.

Clearly the police are not going away. Nor should we simply throw money at mental health, education and other social welfare programs without taking a hard look at their effectiveness. But a little police defunding might not be the craziest thing California communities can do.

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