

Do Americans support defunding police? It depends how you ask the question.

A new poll shows a majority of Americans support redirecting funds from police to other services.

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New York Police Department officers during a rally on May 31, 2020, in New York City. Justin Heiman/Getty Images

It's undeniable that the protests that have swept the country in the month since George Floyd's killing at the hands of police have changed Americans' attitudes.

We know that **76 percent of Americans** say racism is a big problem now, up from just 51 percent in 2015. We know that white Americans, in particular, are talking and **reading** about racism at an unprecedented level.

But there's been a debate as to how much Americans really support systemic change, especially when it comes to the police. In recent weeks, calls for defunding police departments have gotten more public attention. **Specifics of those calls vary**, but in general, defunding police means shifting money from policing toward other priorities like mental health care and housing assistance.

The goal, for advocates, is to replace an institution with a long history of violence against Black Americans and other people of color with an array of solutions designed to meet all people's needs and actually keep them safe. "We need to scrutinize our state and local budgets, educate ourselves about what police do versus what we need to be and feel safe, and realign the budget and our social programs to better serve our public safety needs," Georgetown University law professor Christy Lopez **told Vox's Sean Illing**.

While calls to defund police forces have gotten a lot of coverage in recent weeks, they've also been met with skepticism and even confusion, with some wondering whether the American public — especially white Americans — will ever get on board with the idea. And polling up until now has shown that majorities of Americans oppose the idea of defunding the police.

However, a **new poll conducted by the research firm PerryUdem** shows that when it comes to public opinion, the way people talk about police funding may matter. The poll, conducted among 1,115 adults from June 15 to 17, didn't ask if people supported or opposed defunding police departments. But it did ask how they felt about redirecting some taxpayer funds to other agencies, so that they, instead of police, could respond to some emergencies. And respondents were receptive: For example, 72 percent of respondents said they supported reallocating some police funding to help mental health experts, rather than armed officers, respond to mental health emergencies.

Some of the change may simply have to do with time — among white Americans in particular, there's been a steep learning curve in recent weeks when it comes to police violence and proposals to eliminate it. Americans have watched as Minneapolis, Minnesota, where George Floyd was killed, announced plans to **dismantle its police department**, and other cities like **Los Angeles** announced funding cuts to police. The concept of defunding, as well as the language around it, has been debated in the **New York Times**, the **Washington Post**, and elsewhere.

“People's understanding is evolving literally every day,” Tresa Udem, a partner at PerryUdem, told Vox. But she said, “when there's very little knowledge” about a concept, “that's when question wording really has an effect on responses.”

Defunding the police isn't a new concept to the many activists who have been advocating for it for decades. But it is new to millions of Americans who have been inspired by the recent protests to pay more attention to systemic racism and police brutality. And the PerryUdem polling suggests that, although the idea of defunding the police has been seen as unpopular, some of its component ideas actually attract widespread support.

When it comes to support for police funding cuts, how you frame the issue matters

Attitudes toward the police have shifted considerably in recent months, especially among white Americans. For example, in 2016, just 25 percent of white Americans said that the police were more likely to use excessive force on Black suspects. After this year's protests began, that figure **jumped to 49 percent**.

But there have been a lot of questions about how far those attitude changes go. Majorities of Americans support reforms like banning chokeholds, for example, but many activists say those reforms don't go far enough, since **many departments have already adopted them** and violence continues.

Instead, many organizers around the country — along with **some elected officials** — are calling for defunding the police, dismantling police departments, and exploring other ways to keep communities safe. The idea of defunding the police hasn't gotten as much support in

recent polls as other changes; for example, just 27 percent of Americans supported it in a [HuffPost/YouGov poll](#) conducted June 8-10.

Even when pollsters have asked about cutting funding to police and redirecting it to social services, many Americans balk. In an [ABC/Ipsos poll conducted June 10-11](#), 60 percent of Americans opposed shifting funding from police departments to mental health, housing, and education programs, while just 39 percent supported such a plan.

But the PerryUndem researchers asked the question a little differently: “Right now,” their survey read, “taxpayer dollars for police departments go to all kinds of things police officers are responsible for — from writing up traffic accident reports for insurance companies to resolving disputes between neighbors to investigating murders.”

Respondents were then asked if they supported having some of those taxpayer dollars — and the responsibility that goes along with them — directed elsewhere instead. Most said yes.

In addition to the 72 percent who said they supported redirecting money from police departments to pay for mental health experts, 70 percent said they would support having taxpayer dollars reallocated to “pay for a health care professional to go to a medical emergency, instead of an armed police officer.” And 66 percent said they supported reallocating funds to “pay for a social worker to respond to a call about a homeless person who is loitering, instead of an armed police officer.”

The poll also asked Americans if they would support an option short of full defunding, in which “police could focus on crimes like burglary and murder, and other service providers could focus on emergency calls about addiction, mental illness, and homelessness.” A full 61 percent of respondents supported this option, and just 16 percent opposed it (22 percent said they were unsure).

The differences between the PerryUndem results and previous polling are especially striking among white respondents. Black Americans tend to support police defunding at higher rates than other groups — in the ABC poll, for example, 57 percent of Black respondents supported defunding, compared with just 26 percent of white respondents. But in the PerryUndem poll, a full 67 percent of white respondents supported redirecting funds to send a mental health professional to a mental health emergency, and 64 percent supported reallocating money to send a social worker to a call involving a homeless person (87 percent and 71 percent of Black respondents, respectively, supported these changes).

Some of the differences between the PerryUndem poll and others likely have to do with language. The phrase “defunding the police” has been unpopular in many polls, and the concept of reallocating funding, while more popular, still hasn’t always gotten the support that PerryUndem saw. But when ABC/Ipsos asked about reallocation, the question was framed more generally, in terms of programs, and emphasized the loss to police: “Do you support or oppose reducing the budget of the police department in your community, even if that means fewer police officers, if the money is shifted to programs related to mental health, housing, and education?”

PerryUndem, by contrast, framed the question specifically around who would respond to certain emergencies. Undem believes this matters. “When something is brand new,” like public understanding of police defunding, she said, “the more descriptive the better.”

The PerryUndem poll isn’t the only one in recent weeks to find support for shifting at least some police funding. A **Reuters/Ipsos poll** conducted June 9-10 found that among people who were familiar with proposals to move police funding into better officer training, anti-homelessness programs, mental health services, and other initiatives, 76 percent supported them.

And in general, the debate around how to reform, change, or replace police departments in America is still being defined. In the Reuters/Ipsos poll, 51 percent of respondents said they were very or somewhat familiar with proposals to shift police funding — a majority, but a slim one, with lots of room for learning.

Perhaps this is what is most telling about these polls: Many Americans, especially white people, seem to be open to learning and changing their beliefs. In the PerryUndem poll, for example, 52 percent of white respondents said they want to learn about how laws and systems in America may be racist. And 64 percent said they want to learn which police reforms have worked or not worked.

And in the past month, they seem to have taken their quest for education seriously, at least by some measures. **Books about anti-racism** dominate bestseller lists (though **some have pointed out** the limits of reading alone), and **protest organizers are reporting** a large number of white people getting involved in demonstrations, many for the first time.

All this suggests that while the phrase “defund the police” may poll poorly now, the PerryUndem data is a reminder that none of this is fixed. In fact, the country may be entering a rare period of open-mindedness on issues of racism and policing, in which people’s opinions and allegiances could be evolving — and they may be willing to think seriously about big changes they would have dismissed just a few weeks ago.