

Where could redirected police funding go?



Defunding the NYPD could mean more well rounded solutions to addressing homelessness. | Mush Kollection/Shutterstock

Advocates have pushed for the money to go toward youth initiatives, mental health outreach and more.

“Defund the police” has become a top-line [slogan](#) for some protesters and advocates speaking out against police brutality and institutional racism. Most aren’t just calling for police department budgets to be cut, but for that funding to be diverted to other social services.

The New York City Council has so far proposed about \$1 billion in cuts to the NYPD budget. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio has also agreed to reduce the NYPD’s budget to fund youth initiatives and social services, but he

has so far been mum on how much of it he’d like to see cut and where that money would specifically go.

But a number of police reform activists have had their share of [suggestions](#) for city officials about where that funding should be diverted. Given the deep fiscal crisis the city’s budget is facing, there are plenty of programs that could use the funding.

Here are three efforts that currently rely on police involvement that some advocates say

could use a funding boost – and could be done without law enforcement:

Mental health response

Calls to change how law enforcement responds to mental health calls to 911 became more pressing after NYPD officers fatally shot [Saheed Vassell](#), a black man with a mental health disorder, in 2018 after mistakenly believing he was carrying a gun.

New York City has already expanded some mental health initiatives that [rely](#) less on police involvement. Any New Yorker can go on the NYC Well website to request a mobile crisis team to respond to crises. These teams are made up of social workers and people who have experienced challenges with mental health or substance use disorders, known as peers. The city also uses Health Engagement Assessment Teams composed of mental health professionals and peers to respond to non-emergency requests for help from city agencies and 311. This could look like a city agency such as the Department of Homeless Services reaching out for a team to contact a specific individual they work with who may need mental health support. But the responsiveness of mobile crisis teams has been hampered by slow response [times](#) – previously averaging 17 hours – which the officials say will significantly improve as a result of its plan to hire more teams.

Advocates say current initiatives are too limited because they are less responsive and are only focused on non-emergency calls, leaving most mental health responses in the hands of police who received almost 180,000 mental health-related [calls](#) in 2018. Correct Crisis Intervention Today - NYC, a coalition of mental health advocates, used to endorse additional training for police officers to ensure sensitivity when they respond to mental health crises. But the coalition has shifted its agenda after it found that 17 New Yorkers with mental health problems were killed or critically injured by city police officers since that training went into effect in 2015. “As good as the training was, we realized 40 hours of training is not going to change the culture of the NYPD,”

said Carla Rabinowitz, project coordinator for the coalition and advocacy coordinator at Community Access, a nonprofit that offers supportive housing and social services to people with mental health concerns.

What the coalition has since proposed is a \$16.5 million five-year pilot program to establish 24/7 mental health crisis response teams in the two police precincts that see the greatest number of mental health-related calls. It’s modeled after the Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets [program](#) created in Eugene, Oregon, in which mobile crisis teams respond to about 20% of calls to 911. Under the proposed pilot, teams made up of one peer – who has been trained as a crisis counselor – and one EMT would be able to respond to all relevant mental health calls with the same speed as police officers. Only under extreme circumstances – in which a person is threatening to cause “serious bodily harm” to themselves or another person or is wielding a weapon to “credibly threaten” serious harm – would teams be allowed to contact police for support. And if the program in Oregon is any indicator, the need for police may be rare. Less than 1% of the 24,000 calls they responded to in 2019 resulted in mobile crisis teams calling for police backup.

Several groups including JustLeadershipUSA, the Mental Health Project at the Urban Justice Center and Brooklyn Defender Services have also outlined plans for additional avenues for mental health support. Their recommendations include creating more “crisis respite centers” where people in mental health crisis can go for services and expanding the city’s mobile mental health treatment efforts.

School safety

The NYPD’s presence in New York City schools dates back to former Mayor Rudy Giuliani’s administration. Now some educators and advocates are pushing to expel them. Policing in schools has long been criticized for disproportionately targeting black and Latino students and engaging in needlessly punitive or aggressive behavior. Close to 90% of the approximately 900 summonses NYPD officers

issued to students targeted black or Latino youth, according to a 2018 [report](#) from the New York Civil Liberties Union.

Plenty has been done to reduce the involvement of the approximately 5,100 school safety officers in the city, including one [measure](#) the city implemented last year to discourage officers from making arrests for low-level offenses and to emphasize the role of social workers. But now some people are calling for them to be out of the education system altogether.

De Blasio has come out [against](#) removing police officers from city schools, which may make the move difficult to implement. He has also been reluctant to take initiatives evaluating the benefits and drawbacks of shifting responsibility for school safety from the NYPD to the Department of Education. Hundreds of Education Department employees recently [endorsed](#) such a proposal, which would allow the department to oversee its own officers who would be retrained in “de-escalation, mediation, and restorative practices.”

But for advocates like Maria Bautista, the campaigns director at the Alliance for Quality Education, removing police officers will go a long way in making black and Latino students feel safer. Instead, she said additional funding should be pivoted toward mental health services, social workers and counselors in underfunded schools. Redirected police funding could also reverse some of the mayor’s proposed cuts to education.

The Department of Education is facing a 3% cut to its budget – amounting to \$827 million – compared with \$23.8 million initially proposed in [cuts](#) to the NYPD, which is less than 1% of the police department’s budget.

Homeless outreach and support

Destroying homeless [encampments](#). Pulling homeless people off of subway trains. Arrests. Much of what Peter Malvan has seen police do during his nearly nine years in homelessness is at best failing to offer help to homeless New Yorkers – or, at worst, antagonizing and harassing them.

“That’s a waste of a lot of money,” said Malvan, a leader with the Safety Net Activists, an advocacy group for low-income New Yorkers.

Police involvement in homeless outreach has been heavily scrutinized this past year, particularly as it relates to the subway system. De Blasio implemented a [Subway Diversion project](#) that allows homeless people violating transit rules, such as taking up more than one seat, to avoid civil summonses by accepting a referral to a shelter or other services. But advocates for the homeless say in practice it encourages officers to stop and harass homeless people who have violated subway rules more often than they otherwise would. They also criticized the Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s decision to [hire](#) an additional 500 transit police officers last December, in part because of subway homelessness.

Concerns have only amplified since the subway stations have started to close overnight, in part to push out homeless riders sleeping on trains. Police officers and homeless outreach workers are meant to encourage homeless people being booted off trains to be transported to a shelter or hospital, but few of them are accepting offers to stay in shelters.

But in some ways police officers and activists may actually be aligned on redirecting law enforcement’s role in helping New York City’s homeless population.

“The NYPD’s current Subway Diversion program is not really helping the homeless, because there is not enough long-term investment in the mental health treatment and other assistance they need,” Police Benevolent Association President Patrick Lynch said in a [statement](#) in January. “People living on the subway are being temporarily cleared away, offered minimal services and returning the next day.”

Activists have called for prioritizing longer-term housing needs. Jacquelyn Simone, a policy analyst with Coalition for the Homeless – which hasn’t been active in calls to defund the police – said investing more in affordable housing would be vital. About 40% of the city

Department of Housing Preservation's capital funds for affordable and supportive housing projects would be cut under de Blasio's proposed budget from April, which Simone said should be reversed.

Malvan also called for funding to be allocated toward allowing unsheltered homeless New Yorkers to access single hotel rooms for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, a [proposal](#) the City Council and mayor have been staunchly divided on.

Homeless outreach is also already being done by nonprofits throughout the city, who can better build relationships with homeless New Yorkers to connect them with needed services without criminalizing behavior, advocates say.

This approach isn't altogether perfect in practice either. For example, an audit from the state comptroller's office [dinged](#) Bowery Residents' Committee, the nonprofit contracted to do outreach in the city's transit system, for failing to make sufficient contact with homeless people.

Correction: Police issued 900 summonses to students in a 2018 report. An earlier version of this story mischaracterized the penalty.