

Shifting Police Budgets: Lessons Learned from Three Communities

Libby Doyle and Leah Sakala

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Cities have made new investments in nonpolice entities by [shifting some services away from police agencies](#).

Rethinking public safety includes [funding services that reduce common entry points](#) into the justice system and intentionally [mitigating systemic racism and other inequities by expanding access to critical resources](#).

Centering the voices of community members, particularly Black and Latinx people, through [participatory budgeting can generate more equitable reallocation efforts](#).

Following mass uprisings against police violence in the summer of 2020, elected leaders in many jurisdictions pledged to cut police budgets and reallocate funding to advance a broader vision of public safety that includes investment in community-based services and infrastructure. **The following examples illustrate approaches, obstacles, and outcomes of these pledges in three jurisdictions.** Stakeholders looking to advance similar strategies should consider the lessons learned in these jurisdictions and the key questions outlined below.

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

Source of funds. In November 2020, city officials reduced Seattle’s police budget by \$69 million by shifting civilian divisions—such as victims’ advocates, parking enforcement, and 911 call systems—from the Seattle Police Department’s (SPD) jurisdiction into **two new civilian departments**. An additional \$6 million in reductions were realized from high officer turnover in 2020 and a **hiring freeze**.

Reallocation approach. City budget process, shifting civilian divisions from the police department, and participatory budgeting (a method of allocating public money directly through a community-driven democratic process)

Reinvestment. The budget created two new civilian organizations from the \$69 million SPD cut: the Seattle Emergency Communications Center for 911 calls and the Safe and Thriving Communities division, where victims’ advocates will be based. The budget also moved parking enforcement to the Department of Transportation and made the Office of Emergency Management an **independent agency**. The city has pledged to invest \$100 million in projects to benefit communities of color, a

AUSTIN, TEXAS

Source of funds. In August 2020, the Austin City Council voted to **reduce the city’s police department budget by over \$150 million**, or about one-third. About \$31.5 million of the reallocated funds came from cutting cadet classes and reducing overtime. The department cut approximately \$76.6 million by moving certain civilian functions such as forensics labs and 911 dispatch centers out of the police department.

Reallocation approach. City budget process and shifting civilian divisions from the police department

Reinvestment. The funds were reallocated to community-based services and resources, such as permanent supportive housing and services, substance use treatment, family violence prevention, and workforce development. The city council created a “**Reimagine Safety Fund**” to make recommendations for the allocation of \$45.1 million of the police department’s budget to support alternative forms of public safety and community support services. But **recent Texas legislation** penalizes cities for reducing police budgets and requires elections before budget reductions, so funds have not been reallocated, and the civilian functions removed from the Austin Police Department are being transferred back.

PHOENIX UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT, ARIZONA

Source of funds. In the summer of 2020, the Phoenix Union High School District ended its contract with the Phoenix Police Department for school resource officers for the next three years and **reallocated the \$1.2 million per year** through participatory processes to improve school safety in other ways.

Reallocation approach. Participatory budgeting process within the school community

Reinvestment. For the initial investment, school staff are responsible for reallocating \$500,000, students are responsible for reallocating \$500,000, and parents are responsible for reallocating \$200,000. Each stakeholder group will develop, propose, and then vote to select among investment options. The choices will be funded for three years for a total reinvestment of \$3.6 million.

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN CONSIDERING POLICE BUDGET REDUCTIONS AND REALLOCATIONS

▪ **Adjusting police budgets**

- » **Who are the decisionmakers for budget reductions?** In most local governments, budgets are determined by the chief executive or legislative body. Understanding the process, including timing for key decisions, is critical for making changes.
- » **What are the goals of the budget reduction? Do they include changing how communities experience policing?** Some budget reductions are intended to adapt as cost-saving measures or to free up resources, while others are explicitly tied to reducing policing’s impact on communities.
- » **Which parts of the law enforcement budgets are reductions coming from? Are they permanent changes?** Jurisdictions are taking varied approaches to the source of reductions in police funding and the time frame for changes, such as reducing funding for overtime in a given year or permanently shifting certain functions from police departments to civilian entities.

▪ **Reallocating resources**

- » **Are funds repurposed to build a community’s broader public safety infrastructure? If so, do these strategies avoid the harms often associated with policing?** In some communities, money has been reallocated to housing and behavioral health resources as part of broader public safety planning. Others have focused on community development, such as workforce readiness and youth programming. Others did not tie reallocated funds to public safety goals but instead funneled resources to broader infrastructure projects or set aside funds to offset budget shortfalls.
- » **Are reinvestment decisions designed to reflect residents’ priorities?** Some jurisdictions have embraced participatory budgeting, which empowers community members to decide where money is allocated. Jurisdictions have implemented this with varying degrees of success and fidelity to the principles of participatory budgeting.