

Defund The Police? Columbus Police Account For More Than A Third Of City's Budget

Courtesy WOSU

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At protest after protest in Columbus, demonstrators have waved signs with calls to action like “abolish the police,” “disband the police” or “defund the police.”

There's a lot of money to account for: Columbus spends more than a third of its nearly \$1 billion budget on police.

While the slogan is brash, the policy changes behind the call to “defund the police” are often more subtle. Rather than abandoning public safety, advocates say cities should spend less on police and more on programs to improve lives and reduce crime.

Ohio State University history professor Hasan Kwame Jeffries says it's a conversation that shouldn't be ignored.

“When we think about ‘defund the police,’ for people who may be uncomfortable with the language, with the terminology, we have a responsibility as citizens to constantly look at how we prioritize the limited resources, financial resources, that we have,” Jeffries says.

Columbus spends \$361 million a year on the Division of Police – which comes out to 37% of the city’s operating budget. That number has gone up steadily, increasing about \$40 million since 2017.

In comparison, Cleveland is spending \$218 million on police this year, while Cincinnati is spending \$151 million.

Jeffries explains the growing police budget reflects a sort of mission creep, where police have taken on a larger and larger role in public life.

“We’ve been asking them to be social workers, we’ve been asking them to be in schools, we’ve asked them to serve as addiction specialists,” Jeffries says. “And those things, they are neither trained for nor equipped to do.”

The city’s police spending dwarfs many other divisions. The entire city health department, for instance, is about one-tenth its size both in terms of staff and dollars.

Even individual line items within the police budget outstrip spending on some of the efforts local leaders routinely cite as top priorities.

Take police vehicles. The city spends about \$9 million a year just on maintenance and gas. That’s \$1.5 million more than Columbus spends on affordable housing.

The city set aside \$1.2 million for helicopter maintenance, and \$333,000 for helicopter fuel. There's \$2.5 million in the police budget for towing, and \$457,600 for ammunition.



Protestors gather at the home of Columbus school board president Jennifer Adair demanding the district stop using resource officers from Columbus Police. CREDIT ROGER INGLES / STATEHOUSE NEWS BUREAU

Columbus City Council member Mitchell Brown is a former public safety commissioner, and heads up the council's public safety committee. He says there's good reason for those transportation costs.

“The city of Columbus is approximately 220-something square miles, and we have the responsibility, or the police division does, to cover those 220 square miles with response times that are acceptable to the community,” Brown says.

Columbus has a stubbornly high infant mortality rate, particularly for Black mothers. Local officials established the program CelebrateOne to lower that rate, and Columbus spends \$1.3 million annually on the effort.

The city spends almost three and a half times that much – just under \$4.5 million – on police uniforms and body armor.

Columbus Urban League director Stephanie Hightower, who sits on the CelebrateOne board, says the comparison surprised her.

“Whew,” she says with a chuckle. “Yeah, they could take some of that money from the uniforms and put it in Celebrate One—absolutely.”

Jeffries is a bit blunter.

“That makes me think that our police look good, and we have kids who are dying. Simple as that,” he says. “And what’s more important?”

Brown acknowledges the difference, but argues any number of potentially unsettling comparisons could be made.

“That doesn’t necessarily mean that the other area is less important,” Brown says. “It merely means that we have to stay focused on both, and how do we make that happen for our community.”

Brown contends you don’t contribute to public safety by cutting the police budget.

Hightower stops short of joining calls to defund the police. She says reforming a “failed institution” like the police is typically a waste of time, but she has some hope for the reform measures working their way through Congress.

Still, she says city spending should be re-balanced.

“Could there be other places like CelebrateOne, like affordable housing, like public health where some of that money can be reallocated? Absolutely,” she says. “At the end of the day, though, I think we also have to make sure our city streets and neighborhoods, and our businesses and our homes are protected, and that’s the bottom line for me.”

Mayor Andrew Ginther and City Council will have their work cut out for them. Striking the right balance could prove difficult with the twin challenges of increased public scrutiny and COVID-19 cutting into local revenue, and forcing difficult spending decisions.

By Nick Evans