The Ethics of Defunding the Police

Ben Jones and Désirée Lim

Calls to defund the police gained prominence with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and take various forms. Depending on what will be defunded, the idea has attracted support from different parts of the political spectrum. The politicized nature of the debate often cuts short reflection on how best to assess proposals to defund the police. This article takes up that task. It begins by developing a typology of defund measures: abolitionist cuts, abolitionist reallocation, disaggregative cuts, and disaggregative reallocation. It then outlines a framework to evaluate policing and defund measures, drawing on criteria from the ethics of defensive force. Since policing relies on force, it faces a high justificatory bar and must satisfy the principles of just aim, proportionality, and necessity. The state should not fund unjustified forms of policing that violate those principles. Different violations, though, demand different policy responses.

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Defunding the police emerged as one of the most controversial proposals of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement (Eaglin 2021). It gained prominence following high-profile incidents of police brutality against Black Americans as a strategy to reduce policing's harms. Some cities in the United States reduced their police budgets in response to the 2020 BLM protests, but the reductions were short-lived due to public backlash amid rising crime during the COVID-19 pandemic (Akinnibi, Holder, and Cannon 2021; Fegley

and Murtazashvili 2023). Though primarily associated with the political Left, the idea of defunding the police has attracted some support on the political Right. In response to investigations by the Federal Bureau of Investigation into his conduct while president, Donald Trump called for the agency to be defunded (Ayyub 2023), which some Republican officials echoed and carried out with subsequent budget cuts (Edmondson 2024). While most salient in the US, calls to defund the police also have spread to other countries (Fleetwood and Lea 2022).

The politically charged nature of the debate often cuts short reflection on how best to assess proposals to defund the police. In moral and political philosophy, a few scholars take up the general question of defunding the police (Hunt 2022; Thacher 2022), but there is little attention on how to evaluate different defund measures.[1] As recent debates illustrate, defunding the police takes various forms depending on which specific police functions would be defunded and which alternative services, if any, would receive those funds instead. There is reason, then, not to see defunding the police as an all-or-nothing proposition that one either opposes or supports.

To determine when it makes moral sense to defund the police, it first is helpful to ask when policing is justified. We draw from the ethics of defensive force to answer that question. This tradition of thought starts with a recognition of force's inherently harmful nature. It looks to

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minimize harm by outlining a high bar—the criteria of just aim, proportionality, and necessity—that individual and collective uses of force must satisfy for justification. These criteria also apply to institutions of policing, we argue, due to their reliance on force. The resulting framework incorporates into the evaluation of police activities and agencies questions like: Does this form of policing cause greater harm than it prevents? And are there less harmful options to achieve policy objectives that we currently rely on the police to achieve? When policing is devoid of a just aim, causes disproportionate harm, or causes unnecessary harm, it lacks justification. By identifying the conditions under which policing lacks justification, this framework proves apt to evaluate defund measures. In short, the state should not fund unjustified forms of policing that violate just aim, proportionality, or necessity. Importantly, though, different violations demand different policy responses.

Defunding the police is ultimately a moral as well as a political question. Budgets are rightly described as moral documents, a reflection of a society's priorities and values. Proposals to defund the police come in the context of debates over a critical public good: the provision of public safety (Meares 2021, 33). As social science research shows, violence has devastating long-term effects on communities in the form of physical, psychological, educational, and economic harms (Sharkey 2018). Yet relying primarily on the police for public safety brings its own set of harms, which fall disproportionately on marginalized groups (Soss and Weaver 2017).

With those concerns in mind, the article outlines a normative framework to evaluate measures to defund the police. The first section offers an overview of defund measures and a typology to categorize them: abolitionist cuts, abolitionist reallocation, disaggregative cuts, and disaggregative reallocation. The second section explains how principles from the ethics of defensive force shed insight into whether to rely on the police to address a social challenge. The third, fourth, and fifth sections apply the criteria of just aim, proportionality, and necessity to policing, along with examples of policing that violate each criterion. The sixth section closes by considering our framework's implications for both public safety policy and politics.

Many of the examples illustrating the framework come from the contemporary US, since it has been the primary focus of recent debates over defunding the police. We understand the framework's relevance, however, as not strictly limited to this context. The framework is grounded in familiar principles with broad appeal, like proportionality and necessity. As such, it has the potential to offer guidance across a wider range of places and times than just the US today, which is reflected in some of the examples considered.[2]

Defunding the Police: A Typology

Calls to defund the police look to reduce their budgets, often with the demand to shift funds from policing to alternative models for preventing violence and responding to individuals in crisis (Cobbina-Dungy and Jones-Brown 2023; Su, O'Rourke, and Binder 2022). Specifically, we understand defunding the police to mean a decrease in a police agency's budget without reallocating the affected funds—at least not entirely—within the same or to another police agency. By a police agency, we mean a government agency charged with investigating and preventing crime, violence, and rights violations as well as assisting in emergencies. A distinctive feature of police agencies is that much of their personnel are sworn officers authorized to use force and make arrests.[3] Defunding the police limits the scope of such agencies.

Some defund measures reduce a police agency's budget and leave it up to police administrators' discretion how to implement funding cuts across their agency. Other defund measures are more targeted, eliminating specific line items —equipment, facilities, activities, salary, personnel benefits, and other resources—in a police agency budget. The most dramatic way to reduce a police agency's scope is to eliminate the agency entirely, which also counts as a defund measure (as long as the funds are not entirely redirected to another police agency).

Examples of defunding the police, inspired by actual policies or proposals, include:

- reducing a police agency's overall budget by a certain percentage (Kaba 2021, 15)
- disbanding a police department and contracting with another agency to provide police services, with the effect of reducing a municipality's police budget (Mazeika 2023)
- abolishing a police agency like Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Uhlmann 2019)
- eliminating funding to hire and train new officers (Holder, Akinnibi, and Cannon 2020)
- canceling planned construction and funding of police facilities (Edmondson 2024)
- transferring a function currently handled by police like traffic enforcement, along with funding for it, to a nonpolice agency (Woods 2021)[4]
- directing a police agency to get rid of equipment like a military vehicle while eliminating funding for it (Nagourney 2014)
- eliminating a unit in a police agency like its vice unit, along with funding for it (Associated Press 2019)[5]

We categorize defund measures along two dimensions: (1) where the funds go and (2) the goal of reducing police budgets. For the first dimension, defunding can mean either cutting police budgets with the effect of lowering

overall government spending or reallocating funds to other services. We refer to the former as *cuts* and the latter as *reallocation*.

The second dimension captures which vision of policing motivates defund measures. The *abolitionist strategy* represents one approach. It strives for a world without police and favors defund measures as a tool to get there. The BLM protests brought attention to that approach, while also sparking debates over the meaning of police abolition. Some propose understanding abolition as remaking police institutions to serve the public good (Meares 2021, 31–35) or as ending harmful features of policing like its "carceral logic" and retributive mindset (Lopez 2022). Abolitionist organizers push back on those interpretations, however. As Mariame Kaba (2021, 14) puts it, "Yes, We Mean Literally Abolish the Police." We follow Kaba's literal understanding of police abolition. In response to concerns over policing, the abolitionist strategy seeks to end all police agencies. It takes that position because in its view policing generally, not just aspects of policing, lacks justification (see Davis 2005; Kaba and Ritchie 2022; McDowell and Fernandez 2018; McLeod 2019; Purnell 2021; Terwiel 2023). When the goal of ending the police motivates defund measures, they fall in the category of *abolitionist defunding*.

Now, it is possible to support measures defunding the police while rejecting the goal of abolishing them. The *disaggregative strategy*, as we call it, aims to reduce our reliance on the police while recognizing the continued need for police to perform certain functions. Barry Friedman (2021) exemplifies this approach in his call to "disaggregate the police function"—distinguish among the functions the police serve, identify the skill set needed for each function, and ensure that those performing each function have the relevant skill set. In his view, other professionals are better suited to handling some functions now handled by the police, and some functions should be scrapped altogether. Tommie Shelby (2022, 157) also endorses this approach in calling for "greater reliance on social workers and mental-health professionals to deal with social problems rather than always turning to the police," while stopping short of endorsing police abolition. When defund measures are part of a strategy distinguishing between functions that should and should not belong to the police—targeting only the latter for defunding—they fall into the category of *disaggregative defunding*.

As table 1 illustrates, disaggregative defunding can come in the form of cuts or reallocation, and the same is true for abolitionist defunding. Our proposed typology yields, then, four varieties of defund measures: (1) abolitionist cuts, (2) abolitionist reallocation, (3) disaggregative cuts, and (4) disaggregative reallocation.

The abolitionist and disaggregative strategies both see defund measures as a tool to advance their goals, which distinguishes them from a third approach, the *reform*

Table 1
Typology of Defund Measures

	Police abolition ultimate goal	Preserve but reduce police's role
Cut funds	Abolitionist cuts	Disaggregative cuts
Reallocate funds	Abolitionist reallocation	Disaggregative reallocation

strategy. This strategy recognizes problems in policing but rejects defund measures as a solution. Instead, it primarily emphasizes new rules, training, and oversight to improve policing. As we use the term here, reforms avoid reductions in police budgets and sometimes entail budgetary increases for new equipment like body cameras and additional training. Proponents of reform may call for different priorities in police budgets—say, reduced funding for drug raids and increased funding for local foot patrols. But despite being open to shifting funds within police budgets, the reform strategy believes it would be counterproductive to reduce overall spending on the police.

The divergent approaches represented by the abolitionist, disaggregative, and reform strategies nonetheless allow some room for common ground. Reforms that reduce policing's harms, without creating additional barriers to limiting the police's role in the future, have the potential to attract supporters of the abolitionist and disaggregative strategies.[6] Ultimately, though, the abolitionist and disaggregative strategies see reforms as insufficient on their own to address policing's problems. From these strategies' perspectives, it is critical to pursue measures that lessen our reliance on the police to provide public safety.

There is also partial overlap between the abolitionist and disaggregative strategies. Defund measures that simultaneously advance disaggregative and abolitionist goals can fall into both categories. Consider efforts to disband and cut funding for a police department's vice unit with a history of abuse. Those with disaggregative goals could support such a move on the grounds that the vice unit performs functions that should not be part of policing (or perhaps government at all). Abolitionists also have reason to support the move as a step, even if small, toward limiting and eventually eliminating the police.

But common ground in all areas is unlikely. Abolitionists understand the police as harmful structures that "breed and perpetuate … violence" (Kaba and Ritchie 2022, 35). In their view, police agencies generally cause more harm than good. Now, abolitionists can recognize some forms of policing as more harmful than others and prioritize defunding its most harmful varieties. Still, the abolitionist view that police agencies and activities lack justification across the board suggests that any step toward reducing

their scope and funding should be welcome. We see that idea in the broad abolitionist demand to cut police budgets by half (Kaba 2021, 15).

The disaggregative camp instead favors a more discriminating approach, which cautions against defunding police functions worth preserving. This approach is compatible with policing being well resourced in areas where it belongs. Sufficient resources can help the police to carry out their functions effectively and guard against problems like corruption that are common where officers receive low pay (e.g., Malik and Qureshi 2021; Pion-Berlin and Carreras 2017; Singh 2020). The disaggregative strategy's view that the police sometimes have a justified role to play in public safety leads it to see some budget reductions as posing moral hazards.

The Defensive Force Analogy

Let us turn to laying the groundwork for evaluating when policing has moral justification, which offers insight into when it should be defunded. Here we draw on the ethics of defensive force. What unifies this body of thought is recognition that force is inherently harmful. As such, its use faces a high justificatory bar. There is broad agreement that this high bar applies to war and individual self-defense. A similar justificatory bar, we argue, applies to the police.

In defending this claim, we start from a point on which policing's critics and supporters largely agree: a distinctive aspect of policing is its reliance on force or its threat. The classic expression of this idea comes from Egon Bittner ([1970] 1990, 123), who describes the police as a "mechanism for the distribution of situationally justified force in society." Friedman (2021, 929) concurs and draws out the implications of Bittner's claim, noting that "harm is innate to policing." Force often inflicts physical and psychological harm on those who experience it. Such harm is an inescapable reality of using force whether in policing, war, or self-defense. Though abolitionists would reject Bittner's claim that the police distribute *justified* force, they share his view that relying on force to ensure compliance is at the core of policing (Kaba and Ritchie 2022, 18). In line with those views, we understand the police's distinguishing feature to be their authorization from the state to use force in advancing its goals, primarily in a domestic context.[7]

The ethical literature on force offers resources to evaluate the police—specifically, justificatory criteria for individual and institutional uses of force. The terminology can vary depending on context (e.g., war or individual self-defense), but substantively there is considerable overlap between criteria, reflecting consistent moral concerns. The points of overlap suggest three core criteria: just aim, proportionality, and necessity. Each criterion represents a necessary condition that must be met.

First, the principle of just aim requires that force's purpose is to achieve some moral good. Since there is always a moral consideration *against* using force due to its inherent harm, there must be a positive reason *for* using it to have any chance of justifying it. Without a just aim, force is a source of gratuitous and unjustified harm. Second, the principle of proportionality requires that force's harm cannot far exceed the harm it seeks to prevent. Even if force has a just aim, it could lack justification by causing harm disproportionate to the threat at hand. Third, the principle of necessity prohibits force that inflicts harm beyond what is required to achieve a just aim. This principle demands that those considering force ask if there is a less harmful way to realize their goal.

These criteria apply to collective and individual uses of force, evident from just war theory's two principal components: *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. *Jus ad bellum* concerns what justifies going to war and includes criteria —just cause, proportionality, and necessity[8]—that closely resemble the criteria outlined here. *Jus in bello* concerns just conduct in war and offers criteria to evaluate particular uses of force—discrimination,[9] proportionality, and necessity—that likewise resemble those outlined in this section (Lazar 2017).

Though not as developed as just war theory, the ethical literature on policing includes a body of thought analogous to *jus in bello*. It draws on principles from just war theory and the ethics of self-defense, like proportionality and necessity, to evaluate police tactics and the use of force (e.g., Bolinger 2017; Ferzan and Harmon 2023; Ford 2022; Harmon 2008; Jones 2022; 2023; 2024; Kleinig 1996; Miller 2016; Page 2019; 2023). What the ethical literature on policing largely lacks, though, is a concept analogous to *jus ad bellum*: criteria to evaluate when the police are justified in serving a certain function (Lyons [2025, 475] also recently makes this point).

One exception is work by Jake Monaghan (2023a, 102–25), which draws on the ethics of defensive force to apply the principle of proportionality to policing. Monaghan's proportionality analysis primarily adopts the perspective of the police—that is, how this principle should inform their decisions on what enforcement activities to pursue (see also Gerver, Lown, and Duell 2023; Monaghan 2021; 2023b). We share Monaghan's view that the police should be bound by the proportionality requirement but focus on an earlier stage of the policy process. At the level of institutional design, the principles of just aim, proportionality, and necessity should inform policy makers when determining what functions to assign to the police. Just as there is a high justificatory bar for sending soldiers to war, there should be a high justificatory bar for relying on the police to tackle a social problem.

Analogies between war and policing raise understandable worries given the militarization of the police and its dangers. In short, the police should not see themselves at war with the communities they serve (Hunt 2021; Stoughton 2015; Walzer 2021). Comparisons between the two

can yield insights, though, and sometimes suggest more stringent constraints on the police than the status quo (Monaghan 2023a, 52–53, 103). There is reason to believe that the analogy proves apt here. The police and the military are *institutions* that rely on force. Obviously, these institutions need principles to guide individual uses of force in the field. But ethical analysis that ends there would be incomplete. The more fundamental question is whether the state should rely on force by turning to the military or police to address a challenge.[10]

In tackling that question, our proposed framework focuses on when the police are justified, not necessarily legitimate. As this distinction is often understood in political philosophy, legitimacy refers to the moral right to impose political obligations and uphold them through force, whereas justification refers to a positive moral reason for an action or institution (Simmons 1999). Legitimacy and justification can come apart, including for policing.

For cases of legitimacy without justification, the state and its principal institutions (including the police) are legitimate because they are democratically authorized or meet some other criteria for legitimacy. But actual states, even legitimate ones, inevitably are imperfect with some unjust laws and enforcement activities. Aggressive drug enforcement under such circumstances represents a potential example of policing that lacks justification due to the disproportionate harm that it inflicts (Monaghan 2018).

Conversely, some forms of policing are justified despite occurring in contexts where political institutions lack legitimacy. Many doubt the legitimacy of states that had Jim Crow laws since they excluded Black Americans from political participation and were not truly democratic (Delmas 2018; Mills 2009; Pineda 2021). Policing during Jim Crow often took horrific forms devoid of justification —violent enforcement of segregation, complicity in lynching, and brutalizing Black Americans with impunity (Burnham 2022). In some cases, though, the police intervened to stop a lynch mob (Beck 2015). It is plausible that, when serving this specific function, the police had moral justification even if the state and its institutions were illegitimate.

Legitimacy remains a contested concept in political philosophy, as consensus proves elusive on what makes a state and its institutions legitimate (Peter 2023). Our framework offers tools for evaluating the police that do not require committing to a particular theory of political legitimacy. In other words, we can make progress in determining which police practices and agencies are justified without needing to settle persistent disputes over political legitimacy.

Our central claim is that the state should not fund unjustified forms of policing—that is, policing that violates the principle of just aim, proportionality, or necessity. One obvious step the state can take is to prohibit unjustified forms of policing. But that step by itself often proves

insufficient. It leaves police budgets untouched, so that funds previously dedicated to unjustified forms of policing remain in police budgets. The effect is more resources for *other* police activities, which we cannot assume are justified. Even forms of policing justified at one level of funding may lack justification at higher levels that increase their scope, intensity, and harms. When a police practice or agency lacks justification, it signals the need to reevaluate and change the current funding for it.

Consider an analogy from war. If a government had previously increased military expenditures to wage an unjust war, the just step now is not to automatically shift those funds to another war. Alternative military action also must satisfy the principles of just aim, proportionality, and necessity. Unless those criteria are met, funds for an unjust war should not go toward war at all. A similar point is true for police funding.

Some may worry that the ethics of defensive force is the wrong framework to evaluate the police. After all, police do much more than use defensive force. Defensive goals are of course central to the police, which often measure their success in terms of reducing violent crime. But the police also advance other goals—like retribution, rehabilitation, and restitution—given their role as often the first point of contact in the criminal justice system (Monaghan 2023a, 87). Relatedly, officers' day-to-day work includes many activities not involving force, from meeting with residents to completing reports to verbally de-escalating disputes. The diverse goals and activities of the police cannot be reduced to defensive force. Perhaps, then, principles from the ethics of defensive force are out of place as justificatory criteria for institutions of policing.

The problem with this objection is that the same point holds for militaries in armed conflict. When at war, militaries do not just blow things up and kill people. They build bases and infrastructure, negotiate with local officials, manage complex logistical operations, and the like. Though defending a state from aggression and civilians from grave harm are often the primary goals of just military action, soldiers, like the police, also can serve retributive and other goals—for instance, when taking suspected war criminals into custody. Such varied goals and activities are not valid grounds to abandon the *jus ad bellum* criteria. The criteria recognize that deploying a military in conflict comes with the risk of substantial harm because of its reliance, even if not exclusively, on force to achieve its ends. Indeed, it would be naïve for ethical analysis to ignore this risk given soldiers' weaponry and expertise in using it. The option of armed conflict thus faces a higher justificatory bar than options not involving force, like diplomatic negotiation.

Now, it is true that the *jus ad bellum* criteria do not apply to establishing a military. Even when there is no present justification for armed conflict, just war theory allows states to fund and train militaries so that they are

prepared in the event of emergencies satisfying the *jus ad bellum* criteria. The justificatory bar for establishing a military is lower than the bar for sending it to war. In theory, a state could dedicate funds that establish police forces kept in reserve only for rare, narrowly defined emergencies. Like the militaries of peaceful nations, the police in this hypothetical case would spend most of their time training rather than performing in the actual circumstances for which they were created. Perhaps some specialized police units fit or approximate this description—for example, a unit that only deploys against active terrorist threats (e.g., an imminent bombing). In this case, the decision to establish the unit does not guarantee its deployment, and only the latter step must satisfy the criteria of just aim, proportionality, and necessity. The reality of how states use the police looks different, however. When a state establishes police agencies, it almost always deploys them in the field to do police work on a continual basis. Because such work involves force or its threat, police agencies cannot escape the high justificatory bar that applies to institutions reliant on force.

This analogy does not suggest that the police necessarily use the same levels and types of force as militaries. Wars often involve missiles and bombs against enemy targets, force not typical in policing (though there are exceptions).[11] These differences impact the justificatory analysis. For instance, force that inflicts less harm does not have to prevent as much harm to satisfy proportionality. Still, the underlying criteria remain the same. The justificatory criteria of just aim, proportionality, and necessity apply to defensive force generally, from a shove to sniper fire to large-scale war. Since institutions of policing rely on force within this spectrum, it makes sense that they are subject to the same justificatory criteria.[12]

But perhaps criteria from the ethics of defensive force leave out considerations relevant for evaluating the police. Recent philosophical work emphasizes—rightly—that policing impacts how benefits and harms are distributed in society, so principles from distributive justice should inform police policy (del Pozo 2023; Monaghan 2023a). Some argue that the ethics of defensive force is orthogonal to principles of distributive justice (Burri 2020; 2022; Quong 2020), implying that the former is ill suited for evaluating institutions of policing.

That view on the relation between the ethics of defensive force and distributive justice does not represent the consensus position, however, as others see the two as intertwined (Draper 1993; McMahan 2005a; 2005b; Montague 1981; 2010). As will become apparent in the "Proportionality" and "Necessity" sections below, our understanding of core criteria comprising the ethics of defensive force incorporates distributive justice concerns. When comparing different harms in the analysis of proportionality and necessity, we argue that how a harm is distributed and who bears it should inform the moral weight given to it. In short, drawing on criteria from the ethics of defensive force to evaluate policing by no means implies abandoning distributive justice concerns.

Just Aim

The first justificatory hurdle for policing is to have a just aim. Though there is disagreement over what the aims of the police are or should be (del Pozo 2023, 10–19; Heath 2023, 9–14; Hunt 2019, 24–26; Kleinig 1996, 22–29; Miller 2016, 92–99), the leading proposals offer several plausible candidates. Perhaps the least controversial is protecting people's rights, often codified in human rights treaties, constitutions, and legal codes. Fundamental rights include protections against violence, as well as social, political, economic, and cultural protections. Upholding these rights is a clear moral good, and as such counts as a just aim for the police.

Another proposed aim of the police is serving as emergency responders who minimize harm in crisis (Cohen 1985, 37–39; Kleinig 1996, 25–26). The public often turns to the police to serve this function since they typically provide service 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Other emergency services provide aid to those in crisis, but sometimes the police have more capacity. The principle of necessity, considered in the fifth section, has implications for how emergency responsibilities should be distributed among agencies. But regardless of what that analysis suggests, minimizing harm in emergencies represents a just aim for the police.

A frequently suggested aim of policing that coincides with protecting individual rights and assisting in emergencies is promoting public safety. Though there is debate over how broadly to understand the term (see Friedman 2022b), most agree that it includes protecting people from violence and violations of other guaranteed rights, as well as from harm in emergencies. Such aims suggest that public safety, too, is a just aim of policing.[13]

Perhaps a more controversial proposal is that the police should promote order maintenance by attending to quality-of-life concerns and managing disputes over public space. Some are skeptical about this claim. Order maintenance can inflict disproportionate harm on already marginalized groups—for example, when the police arrest and brutalize the homeless for loitering (see Friedman 2022a). But it is possible to imagine less dubious forms of order maintenance. As Brandon del Pozo (2023, 61–88) and Monaghan (2023a, 126–49) note, there inevitably are conflicting demands over public space and different views of what activities to permit in neighborhoods, especially in dense urban areas. When guided by principles like fairness, accessibility, and harm reduction, order maintenance potentially represents a just aim for the police.

A final aim of policing often suggested is law enforcement (e.g., Walzer 2021, 98). It is questionable, though, whether enforcing the law by itself constitutes a just aim.

Enforcing manifestly unjust laws, like those perpetrating genocide, fails to represent a just aim. In legitimate states, some unjust laws might be considered honest mistakes that do not deviate too far from justice (Estlund 2007). Perhaps by enforcing such laws, despite their injustice, the police on balance advance a just aim by upholding the rule of law in a legitimate state. That claim must contend, however, with the discretion that the police exercise. Given the many laws in place, it is impossible for the police to enforce all laws all the time. The police therefore cannot avoid decisions about which laws to prioritize for enforcement. Inevitably, considerations beyond enforcing the law enter in, and it seems that just aims like protecting basic rights and minimizing harm should guide the police (Monaghan 2023a). Similar to order maintenance, whether enforcing the law is a just aim depends on what further aims guide it.

Just aims can conflict with each other. For instance, ensuring political rights to protest may increase the risk of violent conflict, which would undermine another just aim: protecting rights against violence. In such cases, if policing seeks a just aim even at the detriment of another, the just aim condition is satisfied. The justificatory analysis continues to the next stage to determine whether the policing in question also satisfies proportionality and necessity.

Policing devoid of a just aim causes harm, due to its reliance on force, without advancing some moral good that could potentially justify the harm. In such cases, there is a compelling case to defund the police. Consider an example from Iran. Mass protests broke out in 2022 after the death of a young woman, Mahsa or Jina Amini, in the custody of Iran's Guidance Patrol or morality police. This agency arrests and harasses women who fail to wear the hijab, wear it improperly in their view, or commit other dress-code violations (Associated Press 2023). By seeking to stifle rather than uphold basic rights of expression, the morality police lack a just aim—a conclusion shared not just by foreigners but also by many Iranians, as evident from the protests. Since this police agency lacks a just aim, it is difficult to justify funding the agency.

As this example illustrates, the case for defunding a form of policing without a just aim does not hinge on identifying alternatives that better advance justice and should be funded in its place. Sometimes it may be unclear what those alternatives are. Or it may be politically infeasible to reallocate funding to alternatives. When such barriers exist, simply ending the policing in question still represents a moral improvement over the status quo.

Proportionality

Policing also must satisfy proportionality. This constraint limits how much harm one can cause in pursuing a just aim, ruling out force whose harm far exceeds what it would prevent.

Proportionality analysis involves weighing potential harms against each other. Obviously, how we understand harm impacts the analysis. A conception of harm that only captures its sheer magnitude—based, say, on some metric of individual welfare—leaves out important considerations. A harm's magnitude matters from a moral perspective, but it is not the only factor that matters. Consider an attack by two unjust aggressors on an innocent person, who must kill both to avoid dying at their hands. Most regard deadly force by the person attacked as justified. On its face, such force—which has the effect of taking two lives to prevent one death—might appear disproportionate. The example highlights that it is morally preferable for harm to fall on the culpable rather than the innocent, which proportionality analysis should account for.

One conception of harm capturing those considerations is what Seth Lazar (2012, 7) calls "morally weighted harm." It treats as relevant factors such as whether a harm is caused or allowed, likely or unlikely, a means or a side effect, and falling on an innocent or a culpable party. For all these pairs, the latter is morally preferable, meaning that it involves less morally weighted harm than the former, all else being equal. By considering such factors alongside a harm's magnitude, morally weighted harm makes room for consequentialist and deontological concerns.

Often invoked to evaluate force in individual encounters, morally weighted harm also applies to harms across populations, which makes it apt for policy analysis. Distributive justice considerations matter when evaluating harm at a societal scale. If two policies impose a similar magnitude of harm, but the first distributes its harm evenly throughout a population while the second policy's harm falls disproportionately on a marginalized group, the first policy is morally preferable. The second policy's unfair distribution translates into greater morally weighted harm (Jones and Tian 2025, 213–14).

Notably, calls to defund the police emerged under conditions of persistent injustice for Black Americans and other marginalized groups (see Hogan et al. 2021; Shelby 2016). Proportionality analysis that fails to account for the role of policies in racial injustice omits a weighty concern. Such a thin conception of proportionality analysis is liable to mislead.

In its morally richest sense, then, proportionality analysis of policing compares the harms it is likely to cause and prevent, informed by distributive justice concerns. Social science research has a key role to play in such analysis by offering a fuller picture of the harms policing causes and prevents. A large body of research looks at policing's impact on crime. A comprehensive review commissioned by the National Academy of Sciences concludes that some police interventions—like hot-spots policing, which deploys greater police resources to areas identified as having high crime rates (Braga et al. 2019)—reduce crime and violence (Weisburd and Majmundar 2018). Policing

that has this effect brings moral benefits: some individuals avoid property loss, injury, and death due to these interventions. Since violence also has downstream effects—like negative impacts on life expectancy and school performance for affected populations (Sharkey 2018)—interventions effective at reducing violence bring considerable benefits to communities that should factor into proportionality analysis.

Such analysis would be incomplete if it stopped there, however, for it also must consider the harms caused by the police. The brutal beating death of Tyre Nichols by Memphis officers engaged in hot-spots policing in 2023 shows that interventions effective at preventing certain harms can inflict grave harms, too (Cardia et al. 2023). This case highlights policing's most obvious harms—bodily injury and death—but its harms extend further. Since the police are charged with making arrests, they contribute to the economic and psychological hardships endured by incarcerated individuals and their families. Evidence suggests that those subject to aggressive police tactics experience declines in mental health and school performance (Geller et al. 2014; Legewie and Fagan 2019). Similar effects spread through communities in the aftermath of killings by the police, whose impacts go beyond just those killed (Ang 2021; Eichstaedt et al. 2021). The burdens of policing's harms also fall unevenly. Studies of drug enforcement, traffic enforcement, stop and frisk, and SWAT team deployments in the US find persistent racial disparities that cannot be explained by differences in behavior between racial groups (Baumgartner, Epp, and Shoub 2018; Epp, Maynard-Moody, and Haider-Markel 2014; Gelman, Fagan, and Kiss 2007; Goncalves and Mello 2021; Mitchell and Caudy 2015; Mummolo 2018; Pierson et al. 2020). The unfair distribution of policing's burdens magnifies its morally weighted harm.

Proportionality analysis often is contested. Indeed, much of politics can be understood as disputes over proportionality. Two factors complicate proportionality analysis: policy uncertainty and moral uncertainty. Policy uncertainty refers to the difficulty of knowing a policy's full effects given the world's complexity. Such uncertainty leads to competing predictions of a policy's harms and benefits. Moral uncertainty refers to the difficulty of knowing how to weight different harms. There may be general support for minimizing harm and distributing the remaining harm fairly. But when those goals conflict amid competing conceptions of harm and fairness, it is less clear how to evaluate those trade-offs.

Policy uncertainty and moral uncertainty are persistent and inescapable features of political life, which can make consensus in proportionality analysis elusive. Like in other areas of ethics, we should expect tough cases that spark disagreement. Still, recognizing that the proportionality condition must be met to justify policing encourages policy debate that considers a fuller range of considerations. And though comparing harms is often challenging, it has long been part of policy evaluation, which offers tools such as empirical surveys and other methods to reveal how people weight different harms (Guerrero 2022, 11).

One historical example that raises proportionality concerns is the police's role in enforcing Prohibition in the US during the early twentieth century. Since alcohol contributes to disease, interpersonal violence, and vehicle accidents, Prohibition enforcement plausibly had a just aim: reducing those harms. The US's experiment with prohibiting alcohol sales nationally had mixed results, however. Public health research notes that Prohibition brought some benefits by reducing alcohol consumption and alcohol-related diseases like cirrhosis (Blocker 2006; Hall 2010). But harsh policing to enforce Prohibition laws and the emergence of black markets appear to have exacerbated violence, as is evident from increased homicides and assaults during the period (Jensen 2000; Vitaliano 2015). Prohibition's eventual repeal reflected a growing sense that its harms exceeded its benefits, which more recent cost-benefit analysis suggests was likely true (Vitaliano 2015). Prohibition enforcement also was highly uneven in that it disproportionately targeted marginalized racial and ethnic groups and the poor (McGirr 2016, 67–102). The fact that Prohibition enforcement distributed its burdens unfairly adds to its morally weighted harm. Altogether, these considerations suggest that agencies like the Prohibition Bureau failed to satisfy the principle of proportionality. There continue to be worries that efforts today to police vice—in the form of enforcing prohibitions on drugs and prostitution—often produce disproportionate harm by driving activities underground and making them more dangerous (Monaghan 2023a, 116–25).

When a police practice or agency violates proportionality, it causes greater morally weighted harm than it prevents. Such disproportionate harm signals that what is being funded lacks justification. The first variety of unjustified policing we encountered—policing devoid of a just aim that is merely a source of harm (see the previous section)—should not be funded at all. The policy implications are not always as straightforward for disproportionate policing. At least in certain cases, it is possible for disproportionate policing to have a just aim and provide some benefits, which ultimately are outweighed by its harms. It is also true that the marginal effects of policing—the marginal harms it prevents and causes—can vary based on the scope and intensity of the policing in question. In fact, many policies have diminishing marginal returns, which can impact proportionality analysis. Policing disproportionate at one level of funding could be proportionate at another level of funding where it has higher marginal returns.

This point may apply to police enforcement of alcohol restrictions. Given Prohibition's disproportionate harms,

there is little support for its return and bringing back agencies like the Prohibition Bureau. But more modest restrictions on alcohol enforced by the police likely fare better in proportionality analysis. For instance, research on raising the minimum legal drinking age in the US finds that it reduced traffic fatalities and crime, while inflicting less onerous burdens than Prohibition (Carpenter and Dobkin 2011, 303–6; Hall 2010, 1171).

Though changes to policing's funding and scope could make it proportionate, it does not follow that the default response to disproportionate policing should be ensuring that funds for such policing still go toward policing. Any proposal to take funds for disproportionate policing and use them for other forms of policing must clear a high justificatory bar. Justifying such a policy requires not only showing that the proposed policing is proportionate. It also must show that the proposed policing is necessary—a principle we turn to next.

Necessity

Necessity is the final justificatory criterion policing must satisfy. It prohibits options that cause more harm than is required to achieve a just aim. As with proportionality, how we understand harm impacts the analysis of necessity, and a concept like morally weighted harm proves apt because it captures the relevant moral factors. When comparing options to attain a just aim, necessity calls for the option likely to minimize morally weighted harm (Lazar 2012; 2018; McMahan 2016).

Some object that this approach reduces necessity to proportionality (Quong 2020, 128–30). Continuity between principles can be a virtue rather than a vice, however, since it suggests a coherent framework for evaluating force. Moreover, the view of necessity suggested here still conveys information distinct from what proportionality conveys. Whether an option satisfies necessity depends on how it compares with other options likely to achieve the same or a similar end. In contrast, proportionality analysis looks at one option in isolation, comparing its harm with what it prevents—that is, the harm that would occur from doing nothing (Clark 2023, 488; McMahan 2014, 3). An option that violates proportionality lacks justification because it is a net loss in terms of what matters morally. An option that violates necessity could be a net positive yet lack justification because another option achieving the same end is morally preferable.

This distinction has implications for defunding the police. If policing has a just aim while satisfying proportionality but not necessity, defund measures in the form of cuts fail to guarantee an improvement over the status quo. Under these conditions, mere cuts end policing that could be a moral net positive without offering something better in its place. Defund measures that reallocate funds have the potential to offer a better alternative. Whether policing's failure to satisfy necessity justifies reallocating funds depends on what alternative best minimizes morally weighted harm. When that alternative is *another form of policing*, violating necessity fails to imply defunding the police. To justify defunding a form of policing that only violates necessity, one must identify a strategy outside policing that better minimizes morally weighted harm.

An example of policing that likely violates necessity illustrates this point. The Memphis Police Department in 2021 launched its SCORPION unit—short for Street Crimes Operation to Restore Peace in Our Neighborhoods—with the goal of reducing violent crime through aggressive enforcement in crime hot spots (Eder et al. 2023; Pereira and Deliso 2023). Officers from this unit killed Tyre Nichols after stopping him for a minor traffic infraction. Though research finds that hot-spots policing reduces violent and other crime, harsh and aggressive varieties—as used in Memphis—are not the most effective forms of hot-spots policing.

Criminologists divide hot-spots policing into two broad categories: (1) increased policing and (2) problem-oriented policing. The first approach increases police presence and enforcement activities, like pedestrian and vehicle stops, in crime hot spots. The second approach looks to identify and remedy the underlying causes that attract crime to an area. If an abandoned house becomes a magnet for crime, a problem-oriented approach may call for boarding up the house and improving lighting around it. Meta-analyses show that problem-oriented policing tends to be as or more effective in reducing crime (Braga et al. 2019, 301–3; Braga and Weisburd 2022, 14).

With its aggressive enforcement practices, the Memphis Police Department chose an approach that inflicts considerable harm, despite there being less harmful forms of policing available to reduce crime. So we have strong reason to conclude that the policing that killed Nichols violated necessity. Whether funding for hot-spots policing in Memphis should have gone instead to alternative public safety strategies depends on their effectiveness in minimizing morally weighted harm compared with other forms of policing.

Proposals to defund the police often implicitly appeal to the principle of necessity, making the case that there are less harmful ways to achieve goals currently pursued by relying on force. A thought experiment by Kieran Oberman (2020, 434) captures this idea:

Whom to Rescue: Attacker is trying to kill Victim and, to save her, you must kill Attacker. Hiker has been bitten by a snake and, to save her, you must drive her to the hospital. Both are strangers, entirely unrelated to you. You can only save one.

Both options—killing Attacker and driving Hiker to the hospital—have the just aim of saving a life. Both options are proportionate. Killing Attacker is a proportionate response to Attacker's deadly threat. Driving Hiker to

the hospital also satisfies proportionality, as it imposes a cost on you and others no greater than what Hiker would suffer absent the ride. Ultimately, the principle of necessity distinguishes the two options in *Whom to Rescue*. Though the two options save a life, killing Attacker comes at the cost of both taking a life and letting someone die, whereas driving Hiker to the hospital only involves letting someone die. Compared with the alternative, killing Attacker entails greater morally weighted harm, meaning it violates necessity. What necessity implies in this scenario seems intuitively right: you should save Hiker rather than Victim.[14]

We can apply the insights from *Whom to Rescue* to policy debates over policing and public safety. Some forms of policing are effective in reducing crime and violence, but what if alternative measures prove similarly effective in reducing crime and violence while inflicting less harm than policing would? Consider the following scenario:

> *City Budget*: A city council can continue to fund enhanced enforcement in crime hot spots or reallocate this police funding to more streetlights and greening vacant lots. Both options would have similar reductions on crime and violence.

Streetlights and greening vacant lots are policy interventions that, unlike hot-spots policing, do not rely directly on force.[15] Since in our hypothetical scenario these interventions offer similar benefits as the policing option while imposing less harm, the policing option fails to satisfy necessity and lacks justification. For that reason, there is a strong moral case to reallocate funds from the police option to the equally effective but less harmful alternatives.

It is not far-fetched to imagine policy choices like the one in *City Budget*. The research on public safety alternatives to the police is not as extensive as the research on policing. Nonetheless, there is growing evidence that a range of interventions outside policing reduce crime and violence. Take the police alternatives considered in *City Budget*. In a randomized controlled trial from Philadelphia, cleaning and greening vacant lots lowered gun violence by 29% in neighborhoods below the poverty line (Branas et al. 2018). A randomized controlled trial in New York City showed that additional street lighting in disadvantaged communities reduced serious crime by around 40% while also reducing arrests—benefits that persisted even after three years (Mitre-Becerril et al. 2022). Other randomized controlled trials on youth job programs (Davis and Heller 2020; Heller 2014; 2022; Modestino 2019), cognitive behavioral therapy (Bhatt et al. 2024; Blattman, Jamison, and Sheridan 2017; Blattman et al. 2023; Heller et al. 2017), and remediating abandoned buildings (South et al. 2023) likewise show these interventions to be effective in reducing crime and violence. We also have promising evidence for the public safety benefits of civilian crisis-response programs (Dee and Pyne 2022), civilian guards near schools (McMillen, Sarmiento-Barbieri, and Singh 2019), expanded access to healthcare

(Deza, Maclean, and Solomon 2022; Wen, Hockenberry, and Cummings 2017), substance abuse treatment centers (Bondurant, Lindo, and Swensen 2018), and community nonprofits (Sharkey, Torrats-Espinosa, and Takyar 2017).

As with the research on police interventions, there is a great deal of variation in the size of these different interventions' effects. Encouragingly, a number of interventions outside policing prove to be cost effective. Some have crime-reducing effects similar to or greater than the effects of more punitive approaches. A study on access to mental health treatment in the US finds that investments in additional mental healthcare offices have similar returns on reducing crime as do investments in additional police officers (Deza, Maclean, and Solomon 2022, 13). Other research indicates that Medicaid funds expanding access to treatment for substance abuse had a bigger impact on reducing crime than did funds for incarceration (Wen, Hockenberry, and Cummings 2017, 79). This research highlights an important point when analyzing necessity: policies targeting crime's root causes sometimes represent the most cost-effective and least harmful options to promote public safety.

One potential objection to shifting funds from policing that violates necessity to other public safety strategies is that it only replaces one form of social control with another. According to this critique, the shift in funding fails to actually reduce policing. If we take money from police agencies, say, to fund more streetlights and civilian teams on the streets focused on violence interruption, these alternatives rely on surveillance and social pressure to achieve their aims. In a sense, they still are varieties of policing (Monaghan 2023a, 16–17)—what some might call "policing lite."

It is true that many alternatives to interventions by police agencies can be construed as having an element of social control. Even greening vacant lots encourages more people to enjoy public spaces, which helps to deter crime through "more eyes on the street." This mechanism of soft deterrence—putting more civilian eyes on the street—is found in a number of public safety alternatives to the police (e.g., McMillen, Sarmiento-Barbieri, and Singh 2019). Interventions focused on addressing the root causes of crime, such as treatment for substance abuse, also can involve social control in the form of nudges to avoid high-risk behaviors.

We can concede this point while maintaining an important distinction between public safety strategies carried out by police agencies and strategies carried out by entities not authorized to use force. The latter sometimes impose burdens like social pressure but stop short of force. We should not dismiss such burdens, which can affect individuals' autonomy. But we generally understand these burdens as less of a threat to one's autonomy and less harmful overall than being frisked, handcuffed, and thrown in jail. Given its acute harm, resorting to force

represents a moral line that we should be cautious about crossing. For good reason, there is a high bar to justify practices that rely on force. The principle of necessity keeps that moral consideration at the forefront when evaluating police agencies' role in public safety.

Implications for Public Safety Policy and Politics

The previous three sections show that policing lacks justification if it is devoid of a just aim, inflicts disproportionate harm, or inflicts unnecessary harm. Unjustified policing indicates that the state is funding something it should not. That point is important but incomplete. It lets us know that funding currently dedicated to policing should change, without giving details on exactly how. The public safety visions outlined earlier—the abolitionist, disaggregative, and reform strategies—fill in those details, notably with different recommendations.

Proponents of the abolitionist, disaggregative, and reform strategies all could agree that a particular form of policing is unjustified. Say some in each camp take that view about the war on drugs, concluding that it causes disproportionate and unnecessary harm. In response to unjustified policing, the reform camp advocates steps to fix policing, without diminishing its overall scope and funding. That could mean policies and training aimed at reducing the harms associated with drug enforcement. It could even mean shifting funds away from drug enforcement to other police priorities. In contrast, the disaggregative and abolitionist strategies see the need to shrink policing. At least in the short term, proponents of these strategies could endorse similar policy responses to the war on drugs, like defunding some drug enforcement and putting the funds toward treatment for substance abuse. But the disaggregative and abolitionist strategies offer rival views of how to define the intervention, with implications for what to pursue next. From the disaggregative camp's perspective, we should treat the intervention as a step in eliminating functions the police are not suited to handle, while leaving in place other functions suited to them. From the abolitionist camp's perspective, we should treat the intervention as one step toward a more ambitious goal: eliminating the police.

Which strategy should guide responses to unjustified policing? There is a strong case for the abolitionist strategy if all forms of policing violate just aim, proportionality, or necessity—if not now, at least in the foreseeable future with the broader adoption of alternatives to the police. If, though, some forms of policing satisfy these three conditions, the abolitionist strategy is in a tenuous spot. In that case, at least some forms of policing are justified, and defund measures that hinder them would have counterproductive effects from the perspective of advancing justice.

At present, there is uncertainty about the extent to which alternatives can replace the police and be effective in minimizing violence and harm. As mentioned already, for a variety of alternatives the evidence so far is promising. Many of these alternatives, though, have only been attempted on a limited scale, so it remains unclear what their effects would be when they are scaled up and introduced into new contexts. More research on alternative public safety strategies would bring greater clarity to evaluating proposals to defund the police.

As the fourth section's discussion of proportionality noted, policies often have diminishing marginal returns. After a certain point, further investments in them have waning effectiveness in achieving their desired results. If a policy has lower marginal returns than an alternative—captured in metrics like reductions in violent crime—there is an opportunity to improve public safety by shifting resources between the two policies. In such cases, ending all funding for the policy with lower marginal returns will not necessarily be the best way to improve public safety. At lower levels of investment, the same policy may yield higher marginal returns, indicating its effectiveness and value from a public safety perspective. In those circumstances, the challenge is finding the right balance between policies to maximize returns on public safety investments.

It is plausible that both policing and alternative public safety strategies have diminishing marginal returns after a certain level of investment. If we look at societies proactive in addressing the social determinants of violence with robust social safety nets, most enjoy lower levels of violence. But though less frequent, violence still occurs in these contexts, like the bombing and mass shooting in Norway in 2011 (Associated Press 2021). In this case, the police intervened to stop an active threat and appeared justified as the best option in difficult circumstances to minimize harm. The persistence of circumstances that justify policing casts doubt on proposals to rely only on nonpolice strategies to advance public safety. Conversely, in societies with weak social safety nets that rely heavily on the police, greater investments in addressing the social determinants of violence have the potential to advance public safety while inflicting less harm. Such interventions may help to reduce a society's reliance on the police.

If policing and alternative public safety strategies do in fact have diminishing marginal returns, the disaggregative strategy—which seeks to reduce policing's role in public safety without eliminating it—finds itself in a stronger position. Unlike the abolitionist strategy, it does not need to show that *all* forms of policing lack justification. More modestly, it needs to show that *some* forms of policing now in place lack justification.

But the disaggregative strategy must clear another hurdle: it must show that, at least in certain jurisdictions, eliminating unjustified forms of policing would reduce police agencies' budgets more than investments in justified

expansions of policing would increase them. Recall that the disaggregative strategy allows for increased spending in areas of policing that are justified. Yet it abandons a commitment to reducing the police's role once such increases exceed reductions to police budgets. That combination of measures is best understood as part of the reform strategy, since it changes the distribution of funding within police agencies without reducing the funding.

The disaggregative strategy must counter the view that the police, especially in the US, are underfunded and increasing their overall budgets would bring net benefits (Chalfin and McCrary 2018; Durlauf and Nagin 2011). Notably, many who champion this reform strategy do not reject the effectiveness of police alternatives. While arguing that the US could reduce crime and violence by shifting resources from prisons to the police, Steven Durlauf and Daniel Nagin (2011, 15) note that greater investments in programs outside the criminal justice system, like those promoting early childhood development, could advance the same goal. Christopher Lewis and Adaner Usmani (2022, 96) likewise conclude that expanding "social policy would reduce crime by addressing its root causes and in turn reduce the need and demand for both policing and imprisonment." Despite acknowledging their public safety benefits, both sets of authors opt against championing such alternatives, deeming them politically infeasible in the US. A more feasible strategy, they argue, is to move money from prisons to the police.

This assessment of political feasibility does not challenge our normative analysis. From a moral perspective, it is better to invest in police alternatives that satisfy necessity than in policing that violates necessity. But if such policies prove politically impossible, as some suggest, our normative framework's practical relevance takes a hit. The framework may be correct in theory but has little value for informing policy, given the political constraints in place.

Predicting politically feasibility is a notoriously difficult task, and we are wary of trying to do so here. There are reasons, however, not to dismiss alternatives to the police as a political dead end. Social movements can shift the window of what is feasible in politics. In fact, we see some evidence for this in recent years. Though many reductions to police budgets after the 2020 BLM protests were short-lived, the movement also sparked policy experimentation and innovation.

Consider the rapid adoption of civilian crisis-response programs to assist those dealing with mental illness, substance abuse, or homelessness. Prior to the BLM protests of 2020, there were fewer than a dozen such programs in the US. The protests brought attention to the programs as a strategy for responding to calls typically handled by the police. Four years after the protests, the number of civilian crisis-response programs across the US had grown to over a hundred (C. Thompson 2024).[16] Though research on this police alternative remains in its infancy, the most rigorous study to date found the program launched in Denver, Colorado, to be cost effective in reducing low-level crime and vulnerable populations' contact with the criminal justice system (Dee and Pyne 2022). There likely is room to expand such services. A recent analysis of calls still handled by the police shows that many do not require their response (Midgette et al. 2024). Declaring BLM and its calls to defund the police a failure, as some do (Londoño 2023), overlooks its role in spurring substantial policy development in only a few short years.

Just as not all interventions in policing are successful in reducing crime and violence (Weisburd and Majmundar 2018), the same will be true of alternatives to the police. But as experimentation with alternatives to the police reveal some that show promise, there is the potential to build greater political support for them.

In this context, an ethical framework for determining when policing is justified or should be defunded can play a role analogous to just war theory. Though governments and officials often ignore just war theory, it would be a mistake to say it has had *no* impact on policy. We see its imprint on international treaties, bans on certain weapons, and the training of soldiers.

This is all to say that the future of public safety policy—and particularly how social movements and the ideas motivating them will impact it—strikes us as less settled than some claim. It is difficult to predict what opportunities there will be to adopt public safety strategies beyond the default option today of turning to the police. Our hope for the framework proposed here is to identify moral tools for navigating such opportunities where they arise.

Notes

1 As this article was in press, "Why We Should Unbundle the Police" by Lauren Lyons (2025) was published. Lyons offers an argument for defunding the police with some parallels to our framework—notably, its appeal to the principles of proportionality and necessity from the ethics of defensive force. Whereas Lyons draws on these principles to generally defend defunding the police, we explore how they can cut both ways. Whether defunding the police has moral justification depends on the particular defund measure and ethical principle (or principles) at stake.

2 See discussions of military policing in Latin America in "The Defensive Force Analogy" section, n. 10, the Guidance Patrol in Iran in the "Just Aim" section, and the US Prohibition Bureau from the early twentieth century in the "Proportionality" section.

3 One potential objection is that this definition excludes softer forms of social control that could count as policing under a broader understanding of the term (Monaghan 2023a, 16–17). We address this concern in the "Necessity" section.

4 To be a genuine case of defunding and limiting the police rather than a budget gimmick, there must be substantive change to the activity transferred to a nonpolice agency. For traffic enforcement, this could mean that those issuing tickets no longer are armed or have the authority to make arrests, detain drivers, or conduct searches.

5 The real-life cases behind the last two examples—the Davis (California) City Council directing its police department to get rid of a military vehicle and the Columbus (Ohio) Police Department disbanding its vice unit—do not appear tied to reductions in police funding. It is possible, though, to imagine such moves as defund measures. For instance, instead of reassigning vice unit officers to different units and keeping overall police funding the same, a municipality could reduce its police budget by the amount that went toward its vice unit.

6 We see this idea in abolitionists' distinction between "reformist" and "nonreformist" reforms. In this framework, reformist reforms further entrench policing as the default response to crime and violence (e.g., reforms that increase police funding through new training or technology). Abolitionists generally oppose such reforms because they make it harder to achieve the ultimate goal of abolition. Abolitionists take a more favorable view of nonreformist reforms, which reduce policing's harms without undermining abolitionist goals (e.g., reforms that disarm the police in certain contexts) (see Gilmore and Gilmore 2022, 265; Kaba 2021, 70–71; Kaba and Ritchie 2022, 130–39).

7 Other law enforcement agencies besides police departments, like corrections agencies, also have sworn officers authorized to use force. Though such agencies are not the focus of this article, principles from the ethics of defensive force likely apply to them, too, given their reliance on force to achieve their aims (see Ristroph 2014).

8 Traditional formulations of *jus ad bellum* also include the principles of legitimate authority, right intention, reasonable prospects of success, and imminent threat. Developments in just war theory cast doubt on the need for these criteria because they either are reducible to other *jus ad bellum* principles or fail to hold up under scrutiny (Lazar 2017, 43). We thus omit them.

9 The principle of discrimination specifies that force in war must aim only at military targets, not civilians (Lazar 2017, 45). Strictly speaking, this principle does not guarantee a just aim. Soldiers waging an unjust war who restrict their fire to military targets satisfy discrimination yet lack a just aim. Still, the principle conveys that only certain targets are morally appropriate. One might say it represents a thin conception of just aim.

10 Some policies blur the line between the military and police, like when the state deploys the military for domestic law enforcement, as is common in Latin America (González 2021). The principles of just aim, proportionality, and necessity remain relevant in evaluating such interventions. Research on military policing raises concerns that it violates proportionality, given evidence that it often fails to reduce—and sometimes exacerbates—violence while increasing human rights abuses (Flores-Macías 2018; Flores-Macías and Zarkin 2021; 2024). As a study of a recent randomized controlled trial from Colombia concludes, "the costs of military policing probably outweigh the benefits" (Blair and Weintraub 2023, 868; see also Blair, Mendoza-Mora, and Weintraub 2025).

11 For instance, in 1985 the Philadelphia Police Department used a bomb in a residential area. During a standoff with the group MOVE, a police helicopter dropped explosives on a house in a mostly Black neighborhood, which killed 11 people, burned down two blocks of houses, and left over 60 families homeless (H. Thompson 2021).

12 A similar point appears true for peacekeeping operations, which employ military personnel and bear resemblances to policing but cannot be reduced to either war or policing (see Levine 2014).

13 Distortions of the concept of public safety are common, like appeals to it to persecute minority groups demonized as threats to a nation or community. Such conceptions fall outside how we understand the term.

14 This conclusion does not deny the substantial morally weighted harm of Victim's death. It simply recognizes this harm's magnitude as similar to that of Hiker's death. In a scenario where only Hiker's life is at risk, most recognize a samaritan duty to save her and Hiker's corresponding right to be saved, since you could save her at little cost to yourself (Wellman 1996, 215). Since in isolation Hiker's claim to be saved appears at least as strong as Victim's, we understand Hiker's death and Victim's death as entailing similar morally weighted harm. The additional morally weighted harm from killing Attacker to save Victim ultimately tips the scale in favor of saving Hiker.

15 Some may note that these interventions rely indirectly on force—the threat of punitive action against those who fail to pay taxes to fund them. Still, these interventions do not entail *more* harm than the policing option, since they are funded by reallocating funds already being collected for the police. The same coercive threat faces taxpayers whether the funds go to the police or to streetlights and greening vacant lots. Where defund measures focused on reallocation need to be cautious is in endorsing measures that, by reducing law enforcement budgets, have the effect of

frustrating the government's ability to collect tax revenue and pursue alternative public safety strategies.

16 These figures come from a 2024 directory of alternative crisis-response programs in the US. The directory lists 116 programs. The vast majority—109 programs (94%)—began after the BLM protests in response to the police murder of George Floyd in May 2020 (Community Safety Workgroup 2024).

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