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Calls to Defund Police on Collision Course with U.S. City Budget Gaps.

CHICAGO, June 25 (Reuters) – A movement in the United States to defund local police departments, sparked by the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, is colliding with a grim budget reality facing cities.

After weeks of protests over police treatment of minorities, some cities are considering redirecting a portion of the money they spend on police to mental health, housing and other social services that proponents of the defunding movement say will help prevent crime.

Calls to defund the police come as the coronavirus outbreak has wreaked economic havoc on cities across the United States and punched holes in their budgets, with the National League of Cities projecting a three-year revenue loss of $360 billion. As a result, there is a lot less money to go around for everything.

Floyd died after a Minneapolis police officer knelt on his neck for nearly nine minutes while detaining him on May 25. His death triggered worldwide protests against racism and police brutality.

Michael Belsky, executive director of the Center for Municipal Finance at the University of Chicago, said personnel costs make up 70% to 80% of most city budgets and that 60% of that usually is for public safety.

He said unless cities get an influx of federal dollars to replace lost revenue, a move that remains uncertain in the U.S. Congress, budget cuts, even to programs that would benefit from a redirection of police resources, will happen.

“If you don’t get some revenue replacement, the flexibility to do any of this is really hampered,” Belsky said, noting that “you still need public safety.”

Supporters of the defund movement recognize that social services are more likely candidates for cuts during tough budget times than police, which have typically been immune to reductions even during economic downturns, according to Rashawn Ray, David M. Rubenstein Fellow at the Brookings Institution.

“I think they would say … ‘Instead, reallocate funding away from police to the social services that are needed badly,'” he said, adding that police budgets can be shrunk by reducing officer tasks like paperwork and responses to non-emergency calls.

SPENDING CUTS AHEAD

As revenue drops and expenses spike, local governments and states will have to cut spending by 5% to 7%, which will produce a drag on the U.S. economic recovery, according to a recent Oxford Economics report.

New York City, once the U.S. epicenter of the virus outbreak, is projected to lose at least $9 billion in revenue. With a June 30 budget deadline looming, there are several proposals to reduce the police operating budget, which totaled $5.6 billion in fiscal 2020, and redirect the money elsewhere.

In San Francisco, which faces a projected $1.5 billion shortfall in its upcoming two-year budget, Mayor London Breed announced a plan earlier this month to move money from the police department to support the city's African-American community.

Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan on Tuesday called for $69 million in budget cuts for city departments, with the largest earmarked for police at about $20 million, as part of a plan to plug a budget gap and cover increased virus-related expenses.

Lori Lightfoot, the mayor of Chicago, which is staring down a $700 million shortfall, has resisted calls for defunding, saying that residents want more police protection.

There were about 468,000 full-time sworn officers in local police departments in 2016, according to U.S. Justice Department data released in October.

(Reporting by Karen Pierog in Chicago Editing by Matthew Lewis)

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