

**Statement before the Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security Subcommittee,  
House Judiciary Committee, United States Congress**

**A Hearing on "Reimagining Public Safety in the COVID-19 Era"**

March 8, 2022, 10:00 am ET  
Zoom Video Webinar

Statement by

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The Manhattan Institute does not take institutional positions on legislation, rules, or regulations. Although my comments draw upon my research as an Institute scholar, the views represented today are solely my own, not my employer's.

## Statement

Thank you to the committee for the invitation to speak to you today about the future of American policing. While I am sure many of my fellow guests will call on you to redefine the role of the police in our society, I am here to challenge the idea that “reimagination” is good. My case is a simple one: police are an effective means for controlling crime. Any significant reduction in their number or responsibilities would come at substantial loss to public safety.

Crime imposes enormous cost on our society. According to one recent estimate, crime produced monetary and quality-of-life losses equivalent to \$2.6 trillion in 2017 alone.<sup>1</sup> This was before the dramatic increase in certain offenses over the past two years, including an unprecedented 25 percent spike in homicide.<sup>2</sup> Crime has significant long-term costs: one study estimates that victimization leads to losses of up to 13 percent of earnings as much as four years after the fact.<sup>3</sup> These costs are borne disproportionately by our most disadvantaged citizens: In 2020, for example, the black homicide rate was 10 times the white homicide rate.

To “reimagine” policing in practice means reducing the number of police officers, or reallocating their responsibilities to other government agencies. But I sincerely doubt that we can make such changes without increasing crime’s already exorbitant cost.

First, police are among our most effective tools for crime control. Decades of research supports the proposition that hiring more officers,<sup>4</sup> deploying more officers in a given area,<sup>5</sup> and investing more in investigations causally reduces crime.<sup>6</sup> One widely cited estimate finds that for each dollar spent on policing, society reaps \$1.63 in social savings from crime prevented.<sup>7</sup>

Second, armed officers are needed for the risks of police work. Advocates of “reimagination” expect to send police to only the most dangerous calls. But in a country with 400 million guns,<sup>8</sup> predicting danger in advance is a real challenge. In Philadelphia, for example, dispatchers routinely misassign mental health calls as crimes and crimes as mental health calls.<sup>9</sup> In 2019, 15 officers were killed and thousands assaulted during routine activities like traffic stops or handling mentally ill individuals.<sup>10</sup> Recent deaths of social workers sent in to such situations highlights the dangers of even mundane policing.<sup>11</sup>

Third, it is more efficient to concentrate responsibility for public order in a single agency, rather than “unbundling” across many agencies. Divvying up police duties among smaller groups of social workers, violence interrupters, and other civilian employees inevitably leads to excess demand for some agencies and slack capacity in others. Centralizing responsibilities preserves a more-responsive civil service, key to both controlling crime and engaging the public.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast to the proven effectiveness of police, proposals to “reimagine” policing are generally either misguided, lacking in evidentiary support, or address only a small fraction of what police do.

The most popular “reimagination” is the replacement of police with “community violence interruption,” a strategy which, as President Biden put it in his State of the Union address, involves “trusted messengers breaking the cycle of violence and trauma and giving young people hope.”<sup>13</sup> Yet violence interruption programs routinely show mixed efficacy, reducing only some measures of violence in some areas, and even sometimes resulting in increases in violence.<sup>14</sup> As Texas A&M University crime-focused economist Jennifer Doleac put it, “the evidence on this strategy ... is extremely weak. We basically have no idea if it works. But even the correlational studies aren’t consistently finding beneficial effects, which should give us pause.”<sup>15</sup>

Another popular idea is to shift mental health and homelessness-related calls to a separate civilian agency. Model implementations like Eugene, Oregon’s CAHOOTS program have existed for a long time. But they do not, in fact, pick up much police work: Only 5 to 8 percent of Eugene calls for police service are fully diverted to CAHOOTS, and the agency spends most of its time on welfare checks and transport.<sup>16</sup> An average of just 3 percent of 911 calls to police across nine major cities are for mental or medical illness.<sup>17</sup>

Lastly, many insist that municipal dollars spent on policing would be better spent on housing, education, or social services. This argument depends invariably on misleading estimates of the true level of police funding. Across all levels of government, police account for less than 3 percent of spending, a relatively small sum that would not obviously yield greater returns if diverted to other budget functions.<sup>18</sup>

This is not to say that there are no non-police interventions that can reduce crime. There is great promise in approaches that reduce public disorder, including greening public spaces, clearing vacant lots, and increasing street lighting.<sup>19</sup> But these interventions, as with any that works by facilitating community self-policing, are backstopped by strong and effective law enforcement.<sup>20</sup> It is good to better equip, better train, and better oversee our police officers. But we should never imagine that we can dramatically reduce their footprint or replace them entirely. To “reimagine” policing invariably means a new wave of crime, a wave that will crush our worst-off citizens for decades to come.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ted R. Miller et al., “Incidence and Costs of Personal and Property Crimes in the United States, 2017,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, October 6, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3514296>.

<sup>2</sup> Jeff Asher, “Murder Rate Remains Elevated as New Crime Reporting System Begins,” *The New York Times*, March 16, 2021, sec. The Upshot, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/16/upshot/murder-rate-usa.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Bindler and Nadine Ketel, “Scaring or Scarring? Labour Market Effects of Criminal Victimization,” *Journal of Labor Economics*, December 17, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1086/718515>.

<sup>4</sup> William N. Evans and Emily G. Owens, “COPS and Crime,” *Journal of Public Economics* 91, no. 1 (February 1, 2007): 181–201, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2006.05.014>; Steven Mello, “More COPS, Less Crime,” *Journal of Public Economics* 172 (April 2019): 174–200, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2018.12.003>; Aaron Chalfin et al., “Police Force Size and Civilian Race” (National Bureau of Economic Research, December 14, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3386/w28202>.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Klick and Alexander Tabarrok, “Using Terror Alert Levels to Estimate the Effect of Police on Crime,” *The Journal of Law and Economics* 48, no. 1 (April 1, 2005): 267–79, <https://doi.org/10.1086/426877>; Sarit Weisburd, “Police Presence, Rapid Response Rates, and Crime Prevention,” *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, December 16, 2019, 1–45, [https://doi.org/10.1162/rest\\_a\\_00889](https://doi.org/10.1162/rest_a_00889).

<sup>6</sup> For a review of the relevant literature see Anthony A. Braga, “Improving Police Clearance Rates of Shootings: A Review of the Evidence” (New York, NY: Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, July 20, 2021), <https://www.manhattan-institute.org/improving-police-clearance-rates-shootings-review-evidence>.

<sup>7</sup> Aaron Chalfin and Justin McCrary, “Are U.S. Cities Underpoliced? Theory and Evidence,” *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 100, no. 1 (March 2018): 167–86, [https://doi.org/10.1162/REST\\_a\\_00694](https://doi.org/10.1162/REST_a_00694).

<sup>8</sup> Aaron Karp, “Estimating Global Civilian-Held Firearms Numbers” (Small Arms Survey, June 2018), <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-BP-Civilian-Firearms-Numbers.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Jerry H. Ratcliffe, “Policing and Public Health Calls for Service in Philadelphia,” *Crime Science* 10, no. 1 (March 2, 2021): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40163-021-00141-0>.

<sup>10</sup> Criminal Justice Information Services Division, “2019 Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted” (Federal Bureau of Investigations), accessed March 4, 2022, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/leoka/2019/home>.

<sup>11</sup> see e.g. Kyle Morris, “Baltimore Safe Streets Social Worker Killed in Quadruple Shooting,” *Fox News*, January 22, 2022, <https://www.foxnews.com/us/baltimore-social-worker-killed-quadruple-shooting>; Emily Crane, “Illinois Child Welfare Worker Fatally Stabbed during Home Visit,” *New York Post* (blog), January 6, 2022, <https://nypost.com/2022/01/06/illinois-child-welfare-worker-fatally-stabbed-during-home-visit/>; Debora Villalon, “Social Worker Allegedly Killed by Teen She Was Trying to Help,” *KTVU FOX 2*, March 23, 2020, <https://www.ktvu.com/news/social-worker-allegedly-killed-by-teen-she-was-trying-to-help>.

<sup>12</sup> For sharing this insight I thank professor Jonathan Caulkins, H. Guyford Stever University Professor of Operations Research and Public Policy, Heinz College, Carnegie Mellon University.

<sup>13</sup> Politico Staff, “Full Text: Biden State of the Union 2022 Transcript,” *POLITICO*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/03/01/biden-state-of-the-union-2022-transcript-full-text-00013009>.

<sup>14</sup> In Chicago, a community violence reduction intervention had no significant effect on gang homicides: Wesley G Skogan et al., “Evaluation of CeaseFire-Chicago” (National Institute of Justice, March 2008), <https://nij.ojp.gov/library/publications/evaluation-ceasefire-chicago>; In New York, a “Cure Violence” intervention had a significant effect in only one of two treated neighborhoods: Sheyla A. Delgado et al., “The Effects of Cure Violence in the South Bronx and East New York, Brooklyn,” *Denormalizing Violence* (New York, NY: Research and Evaluation Center at John Jay College of Criminal Justice City University of New York, October 2017), <https://johnjayrec.nyc/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/CVInSoBronxEastNY.pdf>; In Pittsburgh, violence rose in treated neighborhoods following implementation: Jeremy M Wilson et al., *Community-Based Violence Prevention: An Assessment of Pittsburgh’s One Vision, One Life Program* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2011), [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND\\_MG947-1.sum.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG947-1.sum.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Doleac and Anna Harvey, “Reducing Gun Violence: What Do the Experts Think?,” *Niskanen Center* (blog), August 5, 2021, <https://www.niskanencenter.org/reducing-gun-violence-what-do-the-experts-think/>.

<sup>16</sup> “CAHOOTS Program Analysis” (Eugene Police Department Crime Analysis Unit, August 21, 2020), <https://www.eugene-or.gov/DocumentCenter/View/56717/CAHOOTS-Program-Analysis>.

<sup>17</sup> Cynthia Lum, Christopher S. Koper, and Xiaoyun Wu, “Can We Really Defund the Police? A Nine-Agency Study of Police Response to Calls for Service,” *Police Quarterly*, July 22, 2021, 10986111211035002, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10986111211035002>.

<sup>18</sup> For the sources of this estimate, see Charles Fain Lehman, “Policing Without the Police? A Review of the Evidence” (New York, NY: Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, April 12, 2021), <https://www.manhattan-institute.org/policing-without-police-review-evidence>.

<sup>19</sup> Michelle Kondo et al., “Effects of Greening and Community Reuse of Vacant Lots on Crime,” *Urban Studies (Edinburgh, Scotland)* 53, no. 15 (November 2016): 3279–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098015608058>; Michelle C. Kondo et al., “The Association between Urban Trees and Crime: Evidence from the Spread of the Emerald Ash Borer in Cincinnati,” *Landscape and Urban Planning* 157 (January 2017): 193–99, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2016.07.003>; Frances E. Kuo and William C. Sullivan, “Environment and Crime in the Inner City: Does Vegetation Reduce Crime?,” *Environment and Behavior* 33, no. 3 (May 1, 2001): 343–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916501333002>; Charles C. Branas et al., “Citywide Cluster Randomized Trial to Restore Blighted Vacant Land and Its Effects on Violence, Crime, and Fear,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 12 (March 20, 2018): 2946–51, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1718503115>; Charles C. Branas et al., “Urban Blight Remediation as a Cost-Beneficial Solution to Firearm Violence,” *American Journal of Public Health* 106, no. 12 (December 2016): 2158–64, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303434>; Aaron Chalfin et al., “Reducing Crime Through Environmental Design: Evidence from a Randomized Experiment of Street Lighting in New York City” (National Bureau of Economic Research, May 6, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.3386/w25798>.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Fain Lehman, “The Community’s Credible Threat,” *City Journal*, July 1, 2021, <https://www.city-journal.org/communities-cannot-replace-police>.