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Local Government Spending: Policing Versus Social Services

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Abstract

US cities have recently increased the share of their budgets devoted to policing and decreased the share devoted to social services. However, a growing body of research demonstrates that social services can durably reduce crime, raising the question of whether spending more on police and less on social services reduces crime in the short term only to increase it in the long term. This review addresses this question by first recounting recent trends in municipal budgeting. Then, it summarizes the causal evidence for which local government functions best reduce crime, focusing on policing, education, employment, and housing. Research suggests that education spending efficiently and durably reduces crime with fewer negative externalities than policing but with longer delays. Evidence that housing and employment spending suppresses crime is promising but nascent. Finally, the review recommends turning renewed scholarly attention to government budgets and the root causes of crime trends.

INTRODUCTION

During even the best of budgetary times, city lawmakers face difficult decisions about which government functions to fund. Different constituencies, department heads, and campaign promises compete for slices of the fiscal pie. These decisions get harder during economic downturns, when shrinking resources initiate zero-sum trade-offs. Funding one program means cutting another, and municipal officials have tended to shield police budgets and cut social service budgets when revenue contracts (Beck 2024). Recently, the shift from social service funding to police funding has been accelerating. Between 1971 and 2021, the share of city budgets devoted to policing grew by 19% and the share devoted to social services shrank by 12%, with most of that change coming after the 2008 recession (COG 2023, author's analysis).

If a mayor or city council wants to keep crime low, perhaps this budgetary shift is smart. Many criminologists recommend police spending instead of social service spending because they see efforts to reduce crime through social services as ineffective, impractical, or unnecessary (Wilson 1983, Braga & Cook 2023). According to this group, large drops in crime have not been preceded by large drops in poverty or large increases in safety net provision, so improving social conditions is likely unnecessary to reduce crime. Instead, they consider law enforcement responses to be more effective and immediate. Others oppose social service–based crime prevention because it is more expensive, less efficient, or less politically feasible than a police-centered approach, even if, "in the long run, a significant expansion of social policy would reduce crime by addressing its root causes" (Lewis & Usmani 2022, p. 96; see also Kleiman 2009). Still others believe the "ultimate causes" of crime "cannot be changed" (Wilson 1983, p. 46). Even scholars who agree with addressing root causes often argue that violence is an urgent crisis, so addressing it in the short term with policing is a prerequisite to addressing it in the long term with social services (Abt 2019). The social service skeptics acknowledge that crime is higher in socioeconomically disadvantaged places, but addressing the underlying poverty or inequality is too difficult and, anyway, not necessary to reduce crime.

A nascent body of research raises questions about this approach and about the long- versus short-term efficacy of crime-control efforts.[1] Evidence increasingly demonstrates that social services such as mental healthcare, education, and housing can reduce crime, often in durable ways that do not risk policing's collateral consequences. This recent research joins the decades of evidence showing that the United States is unique among rich countries in its combination of high crime rates, extensive carceral control, and meager social support (Garland 2023, Messner & Rosenfeld 1997). As police funding crowds out social service funding in the United States, are cities inviting the kinds of social and economic hardship that exacerbate the root causes of crime? Is an overemphasis on law enforcement providing immediate but temporary benefits that compromise durable safety? How should a city interested in long-term crime reduction spend its marginal dollar?

This review addresses these questions in three ways. First, it chronicles the recent history of municipal expenditures on policing and social services, including a brief description of budget reallocation's political trajectory. Second, it summarizes major research on which local spending

[1]Crime is a broad and contested term. For this review, I use it to refer to interpersonal (i.e., not financial) violent and property offenses known to the police. While a few of the studies I reference use survey-generated data on victimization or self-reported offending, most use offense data reported to the police. There are, to be sure, biases and measurement error in such police data (Lauritsen 2023). Other cited studies use arrest or incarceration data as proxies for crime, data that are subject to even more bias (Zanger-Tishler & Neil 2025). I make efforts to indicate which data source each study uses, but there is inevitably important nuance lost in summarizing this crime research.

practices and municipal government programs best reduce crime, highlighting studies of policing, education, housing, and employment and focusing on research with strong causal inference design. Third, this review recommends new directions for research on local expenditures, arguing for greater scholarly attention to government budgeting and a renewed emphasis on studying long-duration crime trends and root causes. It includes an overview of the data options available to those interested in studying municipal finances.

Reviewing this literature is useful to not only criminologists, sociologists, and public administration scholars but also mayors, city council members, and city voters curious about the best way to allocate municipal dollars. The literature on government programs that reduce crime is vast, so I do not attempt to be comprehensive. Instead, I limit the review to initiatives that local governments in the United States could plausibly implement, and I focus on initiatives that could address the root causes of crime to promote durable crime reductions. As a result, I do not review community crime responses such as violence interrupters nor do I review behavioral health crisis alternatives that target crime's proximate causes. For high-quality summaries of some of those programs, see Beck et al. (2020). An emphasis on root causes also means that I highlight universal programs that are directed to broad swaths of city residents, but I discuss targeted programs directed to high-risk or criminal justice–involved people when research on universal programs is lacking. Zoning, environmental, and design interventions that reduce crime have been covered thoroughly elsewhere, so I omit them here. MacDonald (2015), Kondo et al. (2018), and Branas et al. (2020) provide good summaries of the crime-reduction benefits of street lighting, abandoned property remediation, zoning changes, and other built environment interventions. Instead, this review covers social services such as schools, jobs, healthcare, housing, and libraries—the kind of services that could provide the support, skills, social networks, stability, and income that help people avoid crime in the first place (Cullen 1994). Finally, I discuss the consequences, not the causes, of local government funding changes. For more on their causes, see Beck (2024).

This review chooses the municipal government as its scale of interest because of the salience and promise of cities. There is no doubt that federal interventions are larger than municipal ones, and national programs such as Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income, and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance have consistently been shown to reduce crime (Deshpande & Mueller-Smith 2022, Messner & Rosenfeld 1997, Simes & Jahn 2022, Tuttle 2019). To focus on the local scale is not to discount these federal programs' power but to recognize their limits. The US government is devolving its responsibility downward, backing away from housing and welfare provision, and handing authority over to lower levels of government (Soss et al. 2011). As cities are left to pick up the slack, they are collectively spending a total of over $1.6 trillion a year, more than the 50 states combined and more than one-quarter of all government spending in the United States (Dreier et al. 2014). City government is also a promising avenue for policy innovation because of its popularity. The public regularly tells opinion pollsters that they trust their local government more than their state or federal governments (Jones 2023). The increasing centrality and legitimacy of cities have been noticed by advocates, which partly explains why social movements such as Black Lives Matter have targeted local budgets (Bell et al. 2021, Phelps 2024). The salience and potential of city government mean that the local scale warrants study.

TRENDS IN MUNICIPAL EXPENDITURES

In the middle of the twentieth century, the United States built a robust welfare state to address social problems with economic security and social solidarity (Garland 2001). This supportive ethos meant that by the 1970s, US cities were spending a slightly larger share of their budgets on social services than on policing. **Figure 1**[2] shows the amount that the median US city devoted to the two

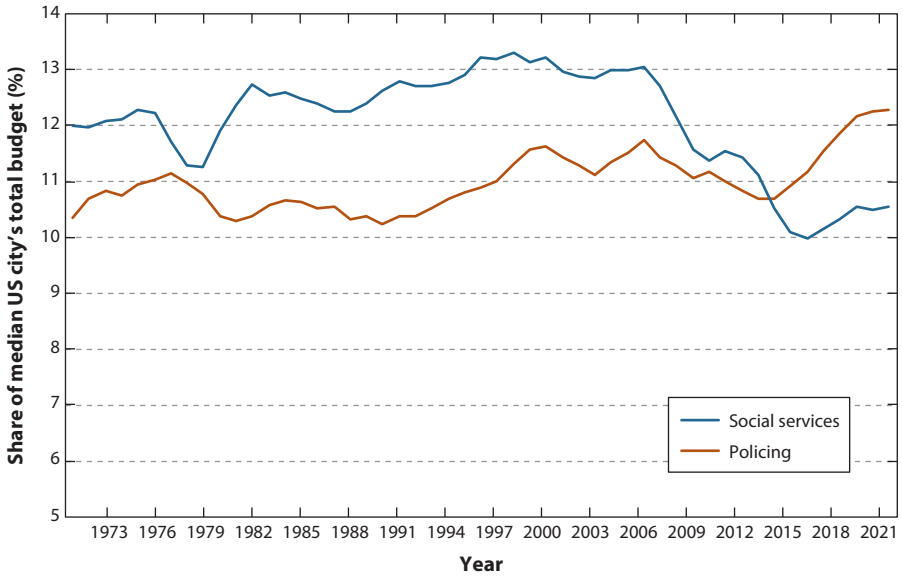

Figure 1

Share of the median US city's budget devoted to policing and social services, weighted by population (1971–2023). Social service spending shrank and police spending grew, with the bulk of that trend occurring after 2008 ($n = 472$ cities).

functions between 1971 and 2021. Here, social services include housing, community development, parks and recreation, healthcare, libraries, and public assistance. Education is discussed separately later in this section. Through the 1980s and 1990s, municipal budget priorities were remarkably static. The typical city spent more on social services than police such that at social services' peak in 1996, 13% of city spending went to them and 11.5% went to policing. The Great Recession inverted that. Following the 2007–2008 economic crisis, cities dramatically defunded their social services. The median city cut almost a quarter of its social service budget by 2015. Police budgets also took a hit at that time, but they rebounded faster and farther, rising to their highest level on record, 12%, in 2021. By contrast, social services have not regained their pre-recession levels, and their 2021 budget was only 0.6% above their 50-year low. The constituent components of local social services were not all cut equally. Between 2008 and 2021, the share of funding devoted to housing was cut 6%, to libraries 7%, to parks 18%, and to healthcare 19% (COG 2023, author's analysis).

Zooming out to look at the half-century that began in 1971, the share of city budgets devoted to policing grew by 19% and the share devoted to social services shrank by 12% during these 50 years. Social service budgets have been cut deeply and enduringly, whereas police budgets have grown steadily. Exploring why this happened is beyond the scope of this review, but see

[2]**Figure 1** depicts direct expenditures (i.e., not expenditures to other governments). Data were obtained from the Annual Survey of State and Local Government Finances from the Census of Governments (COG 2023) via Pierson et al.'s (2015) database. Data are presented as rolling three-year averages for smoothing. Expenditures are inflation adjusted to 2021 dollars using the Consumer Price Index, and the sample includes only cities with more than 50,000 people in 1990. The medians are weighted by cities' 1990 populations. All spending from higher-level governments that is passed through the cities is included, as are cities' nondiscretionary and capital spending. The vertical axis starts at 5% to conserve space and highlight plausible values. Data analysis by the author.

Beck (2024) for more on the contexts of this change and the role of recessions in shifting funds from social services to police.

Spending on the largest local social service, education, is harder to compare to police spending because different entities—school districts and municipal governments—usually control each, and their boundaries are not always coterminous. To overcome this hurdle, one can estimate school districts' expenditures in each city based on the number of children between 5 and 18 years old who live in the city. The Fiscally Standardized Cities (FiSC) database (Lincoln Inst. Land Policy 2023) has done this for 212 large US cities (Langley 2020). In the subset of cities for which the FiSC database has data, K–12 education accounted for five times more local spending than that of police in 2000, but that ratio has been shrinking. Between 2000 and 2021, the median city increased the share of its spending devoted to policing by 9% and decreased the share devoted to education spending by 7%[3] (Lincoln Inst. Land Policy 2023, author's analysis). As with other social services, police spending growth is outstripping education spending growth, albeit at different absolute levels.[4]

POLITICAL TRENDS IN BUDGET REALLOCATION

City expenditures in the United States shifted from social services to policing after the year 2000, despite political and social movements advocating for the opposite during that time. While these social movements reached the apex of their prominence in 2020 with racial justice protests and demands to defund the police, budget reallocation has a longer history. Following the end of the Cold War, political conservatives such as President George H.W. Bush drew on a century-old debate about "guns versus butter" to advocate for cashing in the peace dividend. Cashing in the peace dividend would involve transferring newly obsolete Cold War defense spending into social services or tax cuts (McFeatters 2012). New York City Police Commissioner Bill Bratton borrowed the "peace dividend" term to describe the large decline in stops and arrests his department made following the crime decline of the 1990s and 2000s (Bratton 2015, p. 5). Despite Bratton's analogy, however, few US cities literally cashed in on the crime decline by transferring money away from police budgets (Clear 2021). During the Black Lives Matter protests, advocates called for the "reallocation of funds from police and punitive school discipline practices to restorative services" (Mov. Black Lives 2016, Phelps 2024). This demand, often simplified as "defund the police," harkened most immediately to two trends in the 1990s and 2000s: the justice reinvestment movement and the prison abolitionist movement (CR10 Publ. Collect. 2008, Sabol & Baumann 2020). Despite protests and media attention in 2020, very few police departments defunded their police. Instead, many politicians called for cities to fund the police at that time (Bell et al. 2021, Biden 2022). Although budget reallocation reached new prominence in 2020, its history is longer and more mainstream than is commonly known.

The Black Lives Matter movement increased public support for budget reallocation in 2020, although that support was never held by a majority of the country. At the height of the racial justice protests, 43% of US residents supported "redirecting funding for their local police department to bolster community development programs" (Yokley 2020, p. 1). Two years after the protests, when attention had died down, support for reallocation settled closer to 31%, although almost a quarter of respondents told pollsters they were undecided, suggesting that many people were still

[3]As with the Census of Governments (COG) data above, these values reflect the population-weighted median city. However, the spending amounts now include spending from all municipal, county, school district, and special district governments that overlap a city's boundary.

[4]The numbers in this review largely reflect changes in the share of total budgets. For more on trends in absolute and per capita spending, see Beck (2024).

evaluating a newly prominent policy (Univ. Mass. Amherst/YouGov 2022). Black people typically show greater support for the policy, with about half favoring "reducing the budgets of police departments and shifting the money to social programs" (McCarthy 2022, p. 1; see also Pickett et al. 2022).

IMPACTS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT SPENDING ON CRIME

Although cities have moved away from social services and toward policing in recent years, a growing body of research suggests that social services can create a more durable safety than policing, albeit with longer delays. In this section, I review the evidence on policing's effect on crime. I then focus on local social services by type, reviewing studies on the crime impacts of education, housing, and employment, with brief mentions of libraries and healthcare. Finally, I discuss the literature that directly compares social services with policing to illuminate which budget priorities most durably reduce crime.

Policing

Much of the research on the policing–crime relationship has analyzed the effects of police staffing, not police funding, but the two are closely related (Beck et al. 2023). The balance of evidence finds that increasing the number of police officers in a city reduces its violent and property crime rates, although those benefits are often short-lived and can come with considerable collateral harms. Two meta-analyses from the 2010s summarized the extensive criminological evidence on the impact of police, finding small, negative, and inconsistently statistically significant relationships between police and crime (Carriaga & Worrall 2015, Lee et al. 2016). Those analyses summarized mostly observational research, however, and subsequent quasi-experimental research—largely from economics—would find larger and more robust evidence for policing's suppressive effect.

Studies using variation in federal funding to cities as an exogenous shock generally find that an increase in police reduces crime, at least in the short term. One such analysis of 7,000 cities found that a 1% increase in police employment reduced violent crime by 1.3% and property crime by 0.7% (Weisburst 2019b). While the magnitude of policing's effect varies in other studies, this is a typical finding, with the balance of federal funding studies showing a greater impact of police on violent crime than property crime and one study showing a greater reduction in Black homicide victims than White ones (Chalfin et al. 2020, Chalfin & McCrary 2018, Evans & Owens 2007, Mello 2019).

Which mechanisms link an increase in police with a decline in crime is still somewhat opaque, but low-level arrests are unlikely to be the connective tissue (Mello 2019). Studies exploiting sudden police work slowdowns (i.e., depolicing) due to officers' deaths have found that the attendant decrease in stops and misdemeanor arrests either decreased crime or had no effect on it (Sullivan & O'Keeffe 2017, Chalfin et al. 2024, Cho et al. 2021). When prosecutors in Boston dropped some randomly selected defendants' marijuana charges, people who had their charges dropped were less likely to commit future crime, suggesting that low-level policing might be actively criminogenic (Agan et al. 2021).

Perhaps violent crime enforcement and investigation are the paths connecting police to crime reduction, but violent crime arrests do not always reduce crime rates (Cho et al. 2021). Police officers' role as sentinels—being visible in the community—is the most likely mechanism connecting police to crime control, as this work can deter crime. Sentinel work, however, is a role civilian guards can also perform. Chicago's Safe Passage program demonstrated a 14% decrease in violence outside schools that had nonpolice guards trained in de-escalation patrolling neighborhoods during volatile times of the day (McMillen et al. 2019). Further research on mechanisms

might help indicate whether officers with badges, guns, and arrest powers are necessary to gain the benefits of increased policing.

Whatever causes policing to reduce crime, its public safety benefits have to be weighed against its considerable social costs. Perhaps the highest profile of these are police killings, but less well-publicized forms of police interaction can also have deleterious effects. Merely having more police officers in a school reduces its graduation rates by 2.5% and college enrollment by 4%, and having more police in a neighborhood reduces test scores for African American boys there (Legewie & Fagan 2019, Weisburst 2019a). People who have more contact with criminal justice systems engage in fewer civic actions such as voting or community service, and they have more symptoms of trauma and anxiety (Geller et al. 2014, Weaver & Lerman 2010). These negative externalities can cascade to affect not just those in contact with police but their families and communities as well, and Black and Latino communities are often hurt the most (Kramer & Remster 2022). When considering municipal budgets, police can generate revenue through fines, fees, and asset forfeiture—something social services cannot do at the same scale—but these additions to city revenue have to be balanced against their regressive costs and negative consequences for city residents (Martin et al. 2018). The police also cost cities through misconduct lawsuits and increases in downstream court and corrections spending.

Although policing's collateral consequences might linger, its public safety improvements are often brief. The benefits from most policing interventions recede after several months. Even advocates for robust policing argue that constant, vigilant, and large-scale policing is necessary even after crime reductions occur to avoid backsliding (Bratton & Kelling 2015, Mangual & Latzer 2024). Changes to policing can create reductions in crime for periods of up to seven years, but a constant effort is needed to maintain efficacy over that duration because the impact of interventions such as hot-spots policing often "fades over time" (Abt 2019, p. 51; see also Koper et al. 2021). Sparking positive, self-sustaining feedback loops that do not require constant follow-up interventions is difficult for any policy area and appears especially so for criminal justice (Stevenson 2023).

Education

Causal research has consistently shown that expanding universal K–12 education substantially reduces crime (Lochner 2020). Increasing the time students spend in school at all levels of education—from preschool to high school to college—reduces the crimes they commit (Dodge et al. 2015, Ford & Schroeder 2010, Schweinhart & Weikart 1997). Education reduces crime whether measured at the individual, county, or state level and whether it is measured using observational or experimental methods (Anderson 2014, Lochner & Moretti 2004, Schweinhart 2013, Thornberry et al. 1985). Increased schooling reduces property crime, and while it modestly increases violent crime during students' high school years due to increased interpersonal contact, it decreases violent crime committed later in life (Anderson 2014, Hjalmarsson et al. 2015, Jacob & Lefgren 2003, Luallen 2006, Machin et al. 2011). These benefits not only persist throughout the life course but even beyond, reducing crime among the children of people who received increased education (Chalfin & Deza 2019, Heckman & Karapakula 2019). Most of the evidence base showing that education reduces crime comes from quasi-experimental studies that leverage random assignments to educational programs, changes in compulsory education laws, close school bond elections, or unexpected days off due to teacher strikes (Anderson 2014, Baron et al. 2022, Dodge et al. 2015, Hjalmarsson et al. 2015, Lochner & Moretti 2004, Luallen 2006, Machin et al. 2011).

Among the most cited articles on the schooling–crime relationship is Lochner & Moretti's (2004) study. The authors use variation in compulsory education laws as an exogenous shock to

schooling amounts. They found that requiring one more year of education reduced state-level arrest and incarceration rates by 11–12%. They conducted individual-level analyses of self-reported crime data and found that the more highly educated avoided the criminal justice system by offending less, not by evading apprehension more. Education is unique among local government functions in that researchers have extensively studied its raw spending levels, not just its specific programs. One study exploited court-ordered funding changes and close school bond initiative elections in Michigan as quasi-experiments and found that students attending better-funded schools were substantially less likely to be arrested in adulthood (Baron et al. 2022). The research is clear that increasing education reduces crime.

Employment

Places with high unemployment and low wages have greater levels of crime, so city leaders might want to fund workforce development and job creation programs to make their cities safer (Chalfin & McCrary 2018, Lageson & Uggen 2013). As with housing, there is little research on aggregate expenditures on employment services, but evidence suggests that both summer job programs for youth and programs that provide high-quality jobs reduce crime. Since young people, especially young men, are responsible for an outsized amount of crime, many cities target employment programs toward the young. There is evidence supporting this approach, as an increase in aggregate youth employment reduces crime (Apel et al. 2008). A balance is required, however. Too little employment leaves young people with extra time and financial needs, but too much employment detracts from the kind of academic work and social connections that can catalyze successful careers and friend networks into adulthood (Lageson & Uggen 2013). Finding the balance between these extremes has led many cities to create summer job programs that assist young people financially without detracting from their schooling.

Randomized trials from four large cities indicate that youth summer job programs decrease crime. While the literature diverges as to whether that crime reduction occurs during the summer programs, there is a consensus that it reduces crime after the intervention ends and that the effect is durable, lasting years past the program's conclusion. These crime reductions are observed across a range of program designs, they persist even when programs scale up, and they are especially large for violent crime. Summer jobs programs for youth represent "one of the few [crime] interventions in which success has been replicated" across nearly all the city contexts that have been tested (Stevenson 2023, p. 2026; see also Heller 2014, 2022; Kessler et al. 2022; Modestino 2019).

Summer job programs for youth represent a middle-range approach to the causal timeline of crime reduction. They address the proximate causes of crime by targeting young people, the age group most inclined to commit crime, but they also address the root causes of crime by being offered to a wide range of young people, not just those involved with the criminal justice system or carrying heightened risk factors. Summer jobs provide economic and social benefits that reduce crime in the long term.

The research on whether adult workforce development reduces crime is sparser than that on youth programs. Few studies have analyzed the impact of universal adult job programs (as opposed to those targeting just adults considered high risk such as parolees). This is at least in part because such universal programs are rare (Chalfin & McCrary 2018). Evidence from narrowly targeted programs, however, offers some insight. Here, the balance of the evidence shows that workforce development can suppress crime, with programs that provide high-quality jobs being especially effective.

A randomized experiment that provided jobs to people who used drugs, dropped out of high school, or were previously incarcerated found that those who were over age 26 and were provided

a construction or service job had 24% fewer arrests compared to the control group (Uggen 2000). One follow-up analysis revealed that this reduction was driven by participants' increased income reducing their need for remunerative crime, but a second follow-up found the effect did not replicate with other data (Nguyen et al. 2023, Uggen & Shannon 2014). Combining the insight from Uggen (2000) that the job program worked best for those over 26 with the insight from summer job program evaluations that intervention works well for high school–aged youth suggests that job programs targeting the 19-to-25 set might not be effective. Other experimental studies of city-run adult job programs targeted at high-risk populations have provided mixed results, with a program in New York City reducing crime but programs in Midwestern cities showing no effect (Butler et al. 2012, Cook et al. 2015, Valentine & Redcross 2015). However, these were all programs that provided low-quality, temporary, and/or minimum-wage jobs.

The evidence is clear that having a high-quality and/or long-term job greatly reduces the likelihood an adult will reoffend (Crutchfield & Pitchford 1997, Schnepel 2018). With good jobs or with any job for those over 26, the reduction in recidivism typically persists for at least three years (Schnepel 2018, Uggen 2000). While the evidence is still sparse and the success of programs depends on their particulars, extant research suggests that there are promising public safety benefits for city job programs that provide high-quality jobs and that the duration of these effects may make them more appealing than the shorter-term impacts of policing.

Housing

After investing heavily in public housing in the middle of the twentieth century, the US government slowly rolled back its support, and state and local governments have followed suit (Rice 2016). The median US city spent $89 per resident on housing and community services in 2021, 10% less than it did at the peak in 1997 (COG 2023, author's calculations). How such changes in housing expenditures affect crime and violence is largely unknown. As with most government functions, specific policies and programs—not aggregate budget fluctuations—attract the lion's share of scholarly attention. However, some interventions, such as public housing, temporary rental assistance, and Housing First services for the homeless, have demonstrated crime-reduction effects, suggesting that reductions to housing budgets could meaningfully increase crime.

The first generation of large-scale public housing was high density, underfunded, and criminogenic (Bursik & Grasmick 2001). The growth of dispersed social housing built in a variety of neighborhood types and available to people with a range of incomes, however, demonstrates a null or downward relationship with crime. One quasi-experimental analysis of 38 scatter-site (i.e., low-density) houses owned by the Denver Housing Authority found crime rates were lower after the houses opened (Santiago et al. 2003). Using a similar pre–post methodology, another study found no change in crime near subsidized housing construction in suburban New Jersey (Albright et al. 2013). These single-city studies suggest that subsidized housing neither increases nor decreases crime. Multicity studies that exploit discontinuities in the timing and formula of the allocation of the federal Low-Income Housing Tax Credit have found that dispersed low-income housing reduces violent crime—although not property crime—in poor neighborhoods (Diamond & McQuade 2019, Freedman & Owens 2011), although the program's use of federal dollars might weaken its applicability to city governments.

Despite national trends, several places are building new public housing. Seattle, Washington, and Montgomery County, Maryland, are constructing new social housing units at exceptionally high rates, and a dozen other cities are considering following suit (Denvir & Freemark 2023). These reinvigorations of municipal social housing represent promising natural experiments for future research to evaluate the impact of social housing on crime.

Housing affordability for low-income and working-class residents is attracting attention in some cities, but many more municipal officials are more concerned with a different housing issue: street homelessness. This is partly because of a perceived association between homelessness and crime. Evidence suggests that street homelessness increases crime but that many city services can interrupt the connection. One study using the random assignment of caseworkers to people experiencing homelessness found that receiving any city housing assistance (street outreach, shelter, temporary housing, or long-term housing) reduced recipients' subsequent arrests, criminal charges, and days in jail (Cohen 2024). Another study found that random assignment of temporary financial rental assistance reduced crime in Chicago (Palmer et al. 2019). Some of the most popular and studied homelessness-reduction policies have been supportive housing programs. These Housing First initiatives provide wrap-around services to the chronically homeless, giving people housing and holistic interventions often without the kind of preconditions, such as sobriety, that hobbled previous efforts (Colburn & Aldern 2022). At least three randomized controlled trials (RCTs) have shown that this housing plus services approach reduces criminal justice system contact (Somers et al. 2013, Kerman et al. 2018, Cunningham et al. 2021). However, the crime-reduction benefits are stronger with stable housing over long periods compared to temporary housing provision, and one RCT showed no effect (Raven et al. 2020). Matching studies and pre–post tests have also shown large reductions in jail visits for people who receive supportive housing services (Culhane et al. 2002, Srebnik et al. 2013), with one study showing that the reduction in incarceration persisted for 10 years after first receiving services (Aidala et al. 2023).

Why might homelessness increase crime, and why might services reduce it? The housing and income adversity that homeless people face can push them to commit survival crimes such as trespassing, theft, and drug selling (Snow & Mulcahy 2001). Those who were sleeping on the street and experiencing greater adversity committed more violent crimes, suggesting that it is not just the existence of homelessness but the extent of it that drives crime (McCarthy & Hagan 2024). Some of the arrests of homeless people that stem from substance use disorders, such as public intoxication and drug possession, can be avoided simply by having a home in which to drink or use drugs, so housing reduces many low-level arrest rates mechanically. Therefore, services that target people experiencing homelessness can alleviate crime pressures.

The link between crime and more broadly targeted housing policies, such as the provision of low-income housing, is less well established. It might be that the security and predictability that come from permanent housing reduce the stress that can lead to violence, especially for teens (Ludwig et al. 2001). Housing insecurity makes recidivism more likely among parolees (Jacobs & Gottlieb 2020), and we might expect the same criminogenic effects for nonparolees. The ability to stay indoors and avoid confrontation might also be a mechanism. More research—especially qualitative—in this area would help shed light on why investments in housing assistance so often generate crime reductions.

Although most cities, like the federal government, are slowing their investment in housing and housing services, some places are bucking the trend. Over two dozen cities doubled their per capita housing budgets (adjusted for inflation) between 1997 and 2021, including San Diego, California; Fort Collins, Colorado; and Salem, Oregon (COG 2023, author's calculations). Understanding how these expenditure changes and the programs they fund affect crime would be a fruitful avenue for further research as policymakers weigh further housing budget cuts.

Libraries and Healthcare

In addition to education, employment, and housing, there are at least two other local government functions that could affect crime and therefore deserve brief mention: libraries and healthcare.

Public libraries might reduce crime in their surrounding areas by attracting capable guardians, keeping potential offenders busy, or increasing a community's collective efficacy (Klinenberg 2018). Libraries, like schools, can also build the skills that make legal work more remunerative than illegal work. Conversely, libraries could serve as the kind of gathering places that increase interactions and generate crime. Do these competing forces neutralize one another? An early correlational study found no association between libraries and crime, but two subsequent quasi-experimental studies exploiting changes in library operating hours and the opening of a new branch found that libraries decreased burglaries and assaults near them, although this effect was limited to their immediate vicinities (Peterson et al. 2000, Porter 2014, Ferreira Neto et al. 2023). Notably, it was the number of libraries or the hours they were open—not their specific programs or policies—that reduced crime. This suggests that increased library funding would decrease crime no matter how the money is spent.

Healthcare encompasses many services, and no study to date has analyzed the effect of aggregate municipal healthcare spending on crime, but studies of mental healthcare services and drug treatment centers suggest that local medical spending reduces crime (Deza et al. 2022, Doleac 2018). Similarly, a range of psychological and emotional interventions to improve early childhood development have proven effective at preventing crime (Farrington et al. 2016). Two meta-analyses of experimental studies analyzing programs that provide families and young children with developmental support found that they reduced crime when the children aged into adulthood, although the estimated magnitudes of the effect ranged widely among studies (Deković et al. 2011, Piquero et al. 2016). Drug treatment centers are also promising. An increase in local treatment facilities caused a reduction in both property and violent crime (Bondurant et al. 2016). While state and federal healthcare programs such as Medicaid far outspend local healthcare, there is evidence that municipalities can provide healthcare services that reduce crime.

All Services

Most studies examine a single social service, such as an employment or healthcare initiative, so that is how I have presented the research here, but at least one study analyzed all social services available to California parolees in their neighborhoods. Hipp et al. (2010) collected data on services from "housing to anger management to drug and alcohol services" and found that a one-standard-deviation increase in the number of social services offered within two miles of a person's home reduced their likelihood of recidivism by 41% (Hipp et al. 2010, p. 947). Whether analyzing single or multiple social services, the research presented above suggests promising, although not universal, benefits for social services in reducing crime.

Policing Versus Social Services

The studies cited above study policing or social services in isolation to depict their crime-reduction effects. Relevant for municipal policymakers, however, is studying the two functions together to understand whether cities should invest their limited resources in one or the other. Despite scholarly, policymaker, and public interest in police–social service trade-offs, direct analysis is rare, but the research that does exist suggests that social services are more effective at creating durable safety. The Criminal Justice Expert Panel surveyed 48 leading economists, criminologists, and other social scientists who study crime. Of these experts, 40 agreed that "increasing social service budgets (e.g., housing, health, education) will improve public safety" (Crim. Justice Expert Panel 2021). That was 11 more than agreed that increasing police budgets would do so (Crim. Justice Expert Panel 2021). The few quasi-experimental studies that have contrasted policing with a social service have focused on education. One found that the cost of reducing crime through increased schooling was roughly equivalent to the cost of reducing it through policing but estimated that

school funding would take 13 years to realize its benefits, whereas police spending would take only a year (Baron et al. 2022). A second study found that hiring additional police officers was more cost effective than increased schooling in reducing crime, but "increasing high school graduation rates offers far greater benefits when both crime reductions and [economic] productivity increases are considered" (Lochner & Moretti 2004, p. 183). Comparisons of education and prisons produce similar findings. Increases in the number of pre-school programs or in high school graduation rates create more efficient and effective returns to public welfare and safety than incarceration does (Donohue & Siegelman 1998, Fella & Gallipoli 2014). Contradicting this work, one study found that New York City's justice system interventions explained more variation in the city's crime rates than its economy did, suggesting that workforce development and employment programs would be less effective than police or prisons, but the study was correlational, not causal (Corman & Mocan 2005). While analyses of the policing–social service trade-offs are rare, they suggest greater benefits relative to costs for education compared to policing. The literature suggests that expanding K–12 education is the most efficient action a municipality can take to reduce crime in the long run. Education has few collateral consequences and many positive spillovers. However, it is also among the most studied social services, so greater scholarly attention to other government functions such as housing, healthcare, and employment services might reveal their crime-reduction benefits as well.

The Lochner & Moretti (2004) study mentioned above analyzed education's impact on both productivity and crime. Future studies of policing and social services might consider an even broader array of outcomes (Pfaff 2020). Policing has many negative externalities, such as suppressing political involvement, hurting educational attainment, and exacerbating racial inequality. Social services have fewer harms and many positive effects on health, earnings, and well-being. A fuller accounting of the multiple effects of policing and social services will better reveal the trade-offs between them.

In addition to a more thorough understanding of their social costs, research should more thoroughly analyze how government agencies affect one another. Taxpayers might look at their city's police and social service budgets and reasonably conclude that the top-line number represents what the city spends on that department. Policing and social services affect one another, however, sometimes obscuring their true costs. Policing can destabilize people, families, and communities, leading to greater burdens on social service agencies. Children with incarcerated parents, for instance, use government programs such as reduced-price school lunch and the Children's Health Insurance Program at higher rates than children unexposed to parental incarceration, even after controlling for the selection effects of parental incarceration (Sykes & Pettit 2015). By contrast, social services often avert the need for future criminal justice spending. In correlational studies, the chronically homeless who received supportive housing cost the state 53% to 80% less in police, court, and corrections spending compared to either their preprogram trends or a matched control group (Gilmer et al. 2009, Parsell et al. 2017). Experimental research has provided more ambiguous results, finding that housing support recipients cost the government more in incarceration costs following randomization into housing support services, although that could have been because of crimes committed before receiving the services (Ly & Latimer 2015). Spending on police might increase demands on social services, whereas social service spending might alleviate police spending. Many current studies have a narrow view of the costs and benefits of government programs, focusing on the consequences for crime or the consequences for only one government agency's budget. A more comprehensive analysis will better capture the social costs and the cascading budget effects of policing and social service spending.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Budgets as Policy

In trying to understand whether policing or social services best reduce crime, attention to budgets—not just policies—will prove vital. Passing a budget is among the most consequential actions a government can take, but it is among the least studied (Caldeira & Cowart 1980). Novel law changes such as a new policing strategy, a new housing initiative, or a new healthcare rule are often the occasion for intense lobbying, news headlines, and academic policy evaluations. These new policies, however, might account for only a small fraction of what a government does each year. City budgets, on the other hand, capture the bulk of government action and they represent a major path of influence for lawmakers. They should therefore be central to future research.

A focus on novel policies can miss the majority of the mundane machinery of public administration that proceeds largely unchanged from year to year. Whether or not the city council passes a new bill, schools will keep teaching, police will keep patrolling, and parks will keep operating. How can researchers capture these large, quotidian, and repetitive actions of government? By analyzing budgets. Annual expenditures—what we might call the material or capacity of government—are the part of the iceberg under water (Beck et al. 2023, Schoenfeld 2018). These material investments represent not just the current regime's policy positions but also the structural priorities that get enshrined in government structures. It is now a cliché to say that budgets are moral documents. To quote then-Senator Joseph Biden (2008), "Don't tell me what you value. Show me your budget, and I'll tell you what you value." Budgets lay bare the assumptions and structures that get reproduced (sometimes unthinkingly) each year when elected officials use the previous year's budget to plan for the next.

Besides capturing government structure, budgets are worth studying because they are sometimes the only opportunity policymakers have to enact change. While most mayors and city council members have their priority issues, even the most involved among them cannot understand or manage every line item of their city's budget. They necessarily deal in bottom lines. This is especially true for city council members in strong-mayor systems where the executive branch proposes the budget. City councils can often dictate only departmental budget totals. In such municipalities, the city council cannot direct money to specific programs, so the kind of scholarly research that would be actionable for them would be that which explains the effects of total departmental spending, not the effects of specific programs. This structural difference between mayors and city councils is compounded by a frequent lack of information about where municipal funding goes. Searching news databases for "budget transparency" and a city's name easily turns up near-annual news stories about city councils and members of the public demanding more financial openness from their mayors, city managers, and department heads (e.g., Akinnibi 2023, Gerda 2023). This is an especially acute problem for police budgets because police chiefs often hold political power that inoculates them from answering to civilian oversight (Cheng 2024). City council members often vote on budgets not knowing where the money will end up. Policy-relevant research needs to reflect this reality. Policing scholars would do well to subject police budgets to scrutiny and widen the lens to understand how they exist in the large ecosystem of competing municipal budget priorities.

Long-Duration Analysis

More is known about the proximate than the root causes of crime. This is at least in part because root causes are difficult to capture. Long-duration follow-up studies take time and resources, and they risk considerable attrition (Branas et al. 2020, Nagin & Sampson 2019). They require studying the multiple pathways that connect treatments to outcomes and detecting sometimes weak

signals among considerable noise. A prenatal healthcare initiative, for example, might not realize its maximum effect on crime rates until the programs' beneficiaries reach the criminogenic ages of late adolescence 10–18 years after the program occurs. The Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) aggregates high-quality research studies in a customizable dashboard to help lawmakers understand the long-term costs and benefits of a range of policies, and most of the cost-effective interventions they identify take years to realize their benefits. For instance, WSIPP combined data from 18 studies to estimate that Head Start preschool programs reduce criminal justice involvement and improve educational, employment, and psychological outcomes, but those benefits must accrue for 25 years before they outweigh the program's costs, and the program takes 50 years to reach its maximum benefits (WSIPP 2019). Detecting any effect of social services so many years from their implementation and with so many intervening forces is not easy.

It is precisely the potential strength of social programs—their ability to address root causes and persist for long durations—that makes them hard to study. How can researchers ensure that we do not mistake social services' difficult-to-detect effects for their having no effects? Some of the research summarized above can be a guide here. Baron et al. (2022) matched individual-level administrative records on schooling and adult criminal justice involvement with school district spending levels for 10 cohorts of Michigan students. This allowed the authors to connect spending levels during a student's elementary years with their arrests in adulthood, overcoming the problem of long time lags. One randomized trial of students at Perry Elementary has generated follow-up studies collecting data from the participants 14 times between ages 3 and 55 (Heckman & Karapakula 2019). These kinds of studies follow in the rich lineage of time-series and life-course studies that prioritize long-duration analysis (Sampson & Laub 2016). The latest developments in this vein have helpfully extended the study beyond individuals' lives to trace offending patterns across generations (Wildeman & Sampson 2024). This kind of longitudinal analysis can be extended from the individual and family scales to the city scale to illuminate the durational effects of budgetary and policy changes. For instance, Derenoncourt (2022) analyzed nearly 100 years of city budget data to reveal how the Great Migration shaped segregation, crime, and police spending. A longer-timescale approach to cities will help us understand root causes, identify policies that can last, and scale up effective approaches (Abt 2019).

Along with studying longer time horizons, research should grapple more squarely with how short- and long-term solutions can work at cross-purposes. Take education: As described above, increasing the time students spend in school often increases violent crime in the short term by concentrating young people and increasing their interactions. However, more schooling decreases crime in the long term by increasing the financial returns of noncrime work. If a city or school district decreases the number of school days to avoid violence, it risks increasing long-term crime rates. Similarly, if a city emphasizes policing approaches to public safety over social service ones, it might be buying a short-term crime reduction at the cost of a long-term crime increase.

Some scholars focus on crime's proximate causes because they doubt that crime's root causes can ever be adequately addressed (Wilson 1983). They focus on how best to deter crime using police or how to intervene in the lives of the people most at risk of committing crimes. In this view, universal programs waste resources on people who never would have committed a crime even without the social service. Addressing the proximate causes of crime requires that the interventions (usually a policing strategy but sometimes a team of violence interrupters) work quickly to reduce crime. Advocates for such proximate interventions sometimes hope that reducing crime will create virtuous cycles whereby police-induced crime reduction inspires local residents to exert more informal control and future policing will be unnecessary, but this is very rare, and most acknowledge that police officers will need to "manage street conditions daily. . .continually"

(Bratton & Kelling 2015, p. 5). Approaches targeting proximate causes are fast acting, not long lasting, and require vigilance on the part of police to maintain any benefits in perpetuity. This root-cause pessimism neglects the considerable research demonstrating that social services can reduce crime effectively, durably, and with few collateral consequences, but it is right in saying that proximate-cause interventions are unlikely to endure. Researchers would do well to emphasize the strains of criminological scholarship that emphasize structure and root causes (e.g., Cullen 1994, Crutchfield & Pitchford 1997, Garland 2001, Messner & Rosenfeld 1997, Sharkey 2018).

The largest obstacles to implementing far-sighted crime policy are not scholarly, however. They are political. In most cities, elections for mayor and city council positions are held every two to four years, and many offices have term limits, disincentivizing long-term thinking. A mayor who expands preschool education would not expect the crime-reduction benefits of their effort to appear until well after they were out of office (Kleiman 2009). Moreover, shifting money from schools to police or vice versa is often not possible because most places have separate school boards and city governments. A central question of this review is, given policymakers' limited resources, whether they should spend their marginal dollar on police or on social services. This question is complicated by the short-term incentives of the election cycle and the structural division between the largest social service (schools) and police. However, a more expansive view of policymaker-relevant research could help resolve these tensions. Criminologists who think broadly about the audience for policy-relevant research would target not just police chiefs or even mayors and city council members but also voters. Disseminating research to the public is a tall order, but it would expand the time horizon for solutions. Unbounded by term limits or jurisdictional separations, voters can choose to support bond initiatives and local officials who favor long-term thinking. They can rebalance funding across schools and police by supporting candidates for both school board and city council who share their goals. This means that answering the question about where to most efficiently spend the next dollar is relevant not just to city officials but to all city residents. Criminologists will need to take the long view on crime reduction, analyzing budgets and programs that will not just be fast acting but also long lasting. We will need to identify how to prevent crime, not just respond to it, to create durable safety.

Measuring Expenditures

Researchers interested in tracking municipal expenditures confront cities' varied accounting processes. For instance, one city might record its transit police spending under the transit budget, whereas another might record it under the police budget. There are also differences in whether cities present only their general fund budgets or also report nondiscretionary spending, and this can lead to big differences in estimating budgets. Fortunately, there are several data options. The Census Bureau standardizes accounting practices when it conducts the Annual Survey of State and Local Government Finances as part of its Census of Governments (COG). This allows for comparisons between cities and across time that cannot easily be conducted by analyzing city-created budget documents. The COG is administered to every US city every five years (19,429 cities in 2017) and to a smaller sample of cities every year (usually between 1,000 and 4,000 cities), with larger cities sampled more frequently (COG 2023). The data can be unwieldy, however. They are provided to the public across many files and with unintuitive variable names. There is also a two- to three-year delay in the data release, further complicated by the survey covering cities' fiscal, not calendar, years. The Bureau of Economic Analysis publishes more up-to-date figures, but their data on government revenue and spending are highly aggregated, combining local and state spending, and available only at the national scale (BEA 2023). They do have data on individuals'

receipt of government support at the metropolitan and county levels that could be useful for some research questions.

Two databases have helpfully concatenated, organized, and lightly cleaned the COG data to aid researchers. Pierson et al. (2015) produce an annually updated version of the data with easy-to-understand variable names and a user-friendly structure. Like the Pierson et al. data set, the FiSC database also improves the COG's usability, but its main advantage is that it estimates the combined spending of all levels of local government: county, city, special districts, and school districts (Langley 2020). This allows researchers to capture what local governments spend on a city rather than just what is spent by a city. Because this fiscal standardization procedure is complex, it is only available for 212 large cities. As with any data, users should understand the data management decisions made in the Pierson et al. (2015) and FiSC data sets before using them, especially their missing data procedures. Users might also check that the FiSC database's assumption that spending is proportionate to population makes sense for their research area. For instance, it might not hold for county sheriffs who spend most of their money outside cities even if their county encompasses a city.

CONCLUSION

This review addressed whether US cities should spend their next dollar on policing or social services if creating durable safety is their goal. To this end, it chronicled recent trends in municipal budgeting, finding that cities increased the share of their budgets devoted to policing by 19% and decreased the share for social services by 12% between 1971 and 2021, with most of that change occurring after the 2008 recession. The review then summarized the growing body of research on local government interventions that create public safety, finding that while policing was effective at reducing crime, its benefits were short-lived and carried large collateral consequences. Social services, on the other hand, have been found to be effective at reducing crime, often in more durable ways and with fewer negative externalities than policing, although with longer delays. Education compares especially favorably to policing in crime-reduction power, representing perhaps the most efficient way that cities can create lasting safety. However, other social services have yet to be directly compared to policing, so questions remain about their relative crime-control power. Finally, this review argued that greater scholarly attention to budgets would reflect how power is exercised better than the current focus on new policies. Arguing against short-term thinking, the review made the case for long-duration analyses of crime trends to reveal which local agencies can generate durable, not temporary, public safety.

Since at least the early twentieth century, the social welfare and criminal justice systems have been intertwined. They came out of a similar correctionalist ethos to fix social problems with expert state intervention (Garland 2001). Some scholars have suggested that the two functions are, today, further melding into one monolithic poverty governance regime. Hospitals hire more security guards, social workers collaborate with law enforcement, and police officers divert people from arrests to job and treatment programs (Lara-Millán 2021, Simes & Tichenor 2022, Stuart 2016). With such hybridization, does it make sense to study police and social services as separate entities? This review suggests that it does. Municipal social services affect crime through different mechanisms and over longer time horizons than policing, so while it might be useful to chronicle their convergence, it is also clear that they are distinct. Historically, there has been a negative correlation between welfare and punishment (Garland 2024). Countries and cities that have more of one have less of the other (Beckett & Western 2001, Beck & Goldstein 2018). This suggests that while the two arms of the state might serve a common poverty governance goal, they do so through different means (Wacquant 2001). The welfare and carceral states might be converging,

but no one would suggest that they have fully converged (Brydolf-Horwitz & Beckett 2021). More police officers make arrests than perform social work, and most municipal housing budgets do not include hiring security guards.

This review posits that policing and social service provision are mutually exclusive, but is that true? Could cities not provide more of both (Sharkey 2018, Abt 2019)? Raising more revenue would certainly relax some of the belt tightening that requires city governments to choose one or the other. The shift from social services to police has historically slowed during economic boom times (Beck 2024). However, the prospects for increasing local tax revenue are not promising. As white-collar employees increasingly work from home, commercial rents are declining, threatening to end the century of the postindustrial city, during which office buildings generated the robust tax bases that funded city services (Brosy 2024, Mollenkopf 1983). Rising healthcare and pension costs also represent a growing squeeze on local finances that has led some to predict a "new fiscal ice age" for municipalities (Kiewiet & McCubbins 2014, p. 105; see also GAO 2019). Trade-offs look likely in the near term, and city governments will have to make difficult decisions about where to spend. In addition, funding both policing and social services, even if possible, would neglect the considerable social costs of policing (Bell et al. 2021).

If a municipal government were interested in reallocating more funding to social services to create durable safety, declining revenues are not the only challenge they might face. State governments such as those of Texas and Georgia have recently exercised their powers of preemption to keep cities from reducing their policing budgets (Tharpe 2023). The particulars of each state's override policy vary, but they generally require cities' law enforcement spending to keep pace with or exceed inflation. In Texas, the preemption law applies only to large cities and counties, those most likely to vote Democratic (Pfaff 2023). These laws are new and not yet common, but they limit city residents' democratic control. Such artificially inflated police budgets represent a natural experiment that future research might exploit to test whether increased police spending reduces crime or crowds out social service spending.

As cities grapple with limited revenues, state intervention, and other demands on their resources, they will face zero-sum trade-offs between government agencies. The research summarized here suggests that social services can create durable safety for cities, whereas policing's benefits might be shorter-lived and carry more negative externalities. This would mean that the post-2008 shift from social welfare to criminal justice will have negative consequences for crime rates. However, more research is needed, especially that which directly compares policing to social services, that which analyzes aggregate budgets, and that which analyzes long time horizons. While this review has focused on whether police and social services reduce crime, future research would do well to include a fuller spectrum of outcomes beyond crime to understand how local spending can reduce poverty, unemployment, and ill health as well (Pfaff 2020). This fuller cost–benefit analysis will be vital information for policymakers confronting difficult decisions about which budget levers to pull.

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