



The Iowa Policy Project

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Opportunities to reform policing, community safety in Iowa *Report identifies key data, potential for reform in state, local budgets*

IOWA CITY, Iowa (July 22, 2020) — Police spending per capita has grown over the past 30 years and consumes a greater budget share in Iowa's seven largest cities, while social spending has on average declined, a new report shows.

The May 25 killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police and other widely documented cases of police brutality have prompted large-scale protests in Iowa and nationally, and have put a fresh spotlight on police spending and police practices.

In their new report, *"Policing, public safety and community priorities,"* Iowa Policy Project (IPP) authors Colin Gordon and Peter Fisher identify spending trends by state and local governments, not only for policing but other key public services.

Among their findings:

- Police and corrections make up about 5 percent of all state and local government spending in Iowa, a level largely unchanged over three decades.
- The share of such direct spending by cities and counties has grown.
- Larger urban settings in Iowa have a well-documented pattern of disproportionate minority contact.
- The three state university cities — Iowa City, Ames and Cedar Falls — spend the least on police among cities of 20,000 or more. This may relate to separate university public safety departments in those communities. But social program funding has shrunk as a budget share in those cities.
- The share of budgets going to police in suburbs and smaller non-metro cities has varied, while budgets have shrunk for social services in many small cities.
- Police spending is not directly related to population diversity, regardless of city size.
- Spending levels tell nothing about how police practices might vary.

"Public budgets represent our values and priorities," said Fisher, IPP research director. "The average spending share for the seven largest cities in 2017 was 21.6 percent, and averaged over 20 percent for the other cities of 20,000 population or more, except for the university cities. The new focus on policing reform will have an impact across a wide range of priorities."

Fisher said cities and counties do have options to meet locally identified needs from policing to social services, despite substantial constraints in state law on local control of funding options. The report, however, also pointed out fundamental change in funding of education, social services, and family supports will require state action.

“Cities account for lion's share of expenditures on policing, but spend little on social services other than housing. Social supports and education, in turn, are largely the responsibility of jurisdictions — states, school districts — that spend little or nothing on policing,” the report stated. The report notes current “push for change revolves around two arguments with budget and policy implications for police and other public services.

“The first is simply that our system is fundamentally broken,” the report notes. “The starkest evidence on this point is the pervasive and systemic racial inequity woven throughout our criminal justice system.

“The second argument is that a share of the resources we devote to policing could and should be spent more strategically and effectively. In this sense, the question is one of budgetary priorities.”

Gordon and Fisher do not make recommendations about police procedures, but lay a foundation of budget and debate context that Iowans may use as they “re-imagine” public safety.

“As Iowa communities grapple with these issues, it is important to understand the basic elements of proposals, the arguments and evidence behind them, and the policy and budget implications,” said Gordon, senior research consultant at IPP and a professor of history at the University of Iowa.

The report states the policy implications are wide-ranging. It specifically notes interest that has grown in one approach, community policing — considered less adversarial and oriented more than traditional policing to reconciliation, relationship development and local trust.

“It is the first priority of the city of Iowa City’s 17-joint response to demands of the Iowa Freedom Riders,” Gordon noted. “People in Iowa communities want to be at the table. This is particularly true for those who have been left out by a structure that has protected wealth and white power, skewing interactions between police and the broader community and people of color.”

The report notes that the state can play an important role in police operations at the local level, as shown by unanimous passage of a bill in June restricting police use of chokeholds, mandates de-escalation training and other measures. However, some lawmakers wanted other steps, including a study of racial profiling practices, and such proposals were left to future legislative action.

Find the report on the Iowa Policy Project website, www.iowapolicyproject.org.

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