

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

GEORGE FLOYD PROTESTS AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

“Defund the police:” Perceptions among protesters in the 2020 March on Washington

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Abstract

Research summary: Using qualitative interviews, this study examines how protesters with varying levels of commitment to the Black Lives Matter movement perceive the slogan defund the police. Findings indicate while a small number had reservations regarding the term, the vast majority of protesters associate defunding as a two-step process that starts with reduction of police budgets, followed by reallocation of these resources toward much needed services in the very communities the departments serve. Findings also revealed prior engagement with the Black Lives Matter movement, and the level of commitment of participants did play an important role in being able to provide nuanced context to the call for action.

Policy implications: Implementation of reduction of police budgets indicates a need to reimagine the role and function of police in most affected communities. In addition, there is a need to reinvest in local resources that would provide the much needed support toward marginalized communities. Further, social movement organizations should partner with corporate brands and advertising agencies to effectively promote their goals and slogans toward a diverse range of audience in media.

KEYWORDS

depolicing, qualitative research, race research

May 25, 2020, marked the beginning of a series of protests that galvanized much of America to reassess the role of police in the United States.¹ Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests spread across the nation and globally in the aftermath of two high-profile killings: the death of George Floyd by the actions of four Minneapolis police officers, and Breonna Taylor's death by Louisville, Kentucky, police on a botched raid in her apartment (Reuters, 2020; Smith, 2020). Demands to *defund the police*² echoed throughout the United States in response to the killings of unarmed Black civilians by police, leading to increased public discourse about the power and authority of police agencies.

Following these deaths, millions protested police violence for months even as the world grappled with the COVID-19 public health crisis. In response to public pressure to defund the police, major cities such as New York and Los Angeles cut \$1 billion and \$150 million in police spending, respectively (Holder et al., 2020). Austin, Texas, made a substantial reduction to general fund police spending, as the city slashed the police budget by \$144.5 million and moved some funds directly into social services (Holder et al., 2020; McGlinchy, 2021). Nevertheless, despite calls to defund the police, many cities actually *increased* police spending or kept it unchanged as a percentage of their discretionary spending from the prior fiscal year (Holder et al., 2020; Owens, 2021).³

Although months of demonstrations have not translated to defunding the police in many large cities, important gaps remain regarding Americans' understanding of what this slogan implies when it comes to police reforms. Opinion polls have helped to shed some light on how the public perceives this term, but their findings report inconsistent understanding, perceptions, or beliefs about the meaning of the slogan. While public perceptions of police performance (i.e., use of force, fair treatment of racial/ethnic groups, police accountability) have become more negative since 2016 (Pew Research Center, 2020), some polls show opposition to defund the police and calls to abolish the police (Elbeshbishi & Quarshie, 2021). Others reveal that most Americans believe that defunding indicates changing the way police departments operate (Murray, 2020), but opinion polls are rarely able to delve into the meaning behind these terms. Contradictory results may stem from the question(s) asked, how pollsters ask questions, or by asking leading questions (Leonard, 2007), which can decrease validity of survey results. In addition, respondents may be asked about issues to which they have given little thought, resulting in uninformed views (Dionne & Mann, 2003). Even when people who have strong opinions about an issue are polled, a single polling question rarely captures the nuance of how people understand complex issues (Dionne & Mann, 2003).⁴

In addition, if we are interested in determining what defund the police means in America, public opinion polls may not be targeting the appropriate population. Used on Twitter after Michael Brown's death in 2014 and popularized by the Black Vision Collective in the 2020 protests after George Floyd's death, the slogan *defund the police* was coined by protesters opposed to state sanctioned violence and the lack of accountability for those who use deadly force against Black civilians (Twitter, 2014; Wortham, 2020). How the typical American understands this phrase, however, may differ from those pushing for social change. The perceived meaning of defund the police is filtered through the lens of mass media. The typical American *passively* absorbs information that has been framed in specific ways; however, those protesting injustice are *actively* demanding change, and public officials may be more likely to respond to the viewpoints of protesters than public opinion polls. In addition, protests can have a significant impact on public opinion through a process known as "agenda seeding," which is when activists use methods like disruption to capture the attention of the media and overcome political asymmetries (Wasow, 2020).⁵ Ultimately, activists

have a significant impact on the ways that the media frame their issues, which can lead to different political outcomes.

BLM is a powerful movement that calls out racial injustice. Following the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old Black teenager, BLM brought police violence toward Black civilians into national discourse (Ramaswamy, 2017). Trayvon's death inspired BLM to call for an end to the devaluation of Black lives by the criminal legal system. The movement aims to "eradicate white supremacy and build local powers to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities ..." (BLM Global Network, 2020b). In the aftermath of George Floyd's death 7 years later, millions of people protested around the world such that BLM is thought to be the largest social movement in U.S. history based on a documented number of participants (Buchanan et al., 2020).

In 2020, many White Americans were exposed to the vast racial inequalities entrenched in the policing system, awakening them to see American policing through a new lens (Onwuachi-Willig, 2021). BLM welcomed protesters from all walks of life to protest systemic racism, and many Americans joined these protests with a wide array of commitment toward protest goals. For example, Cobbina (2019) identified three distinct categories of protesters after the deaths of Michael Brown and Freddie Gray based on their commitment level. *Revolutionary protesters* were those who reported protesting daily during the height of protests, believed their overall purpose in life was to facilitate collective action to spotlight the problem of state-sanctioned violence, and had a deep level of commitment to the protest movement. *Intermittent protesters* were individuals who participated in protests at least four or more times and held a middle-ground commitment to the movement. *Tourist protesters* were classified as people who took part in protests less than three times or expressed more curiosity about the social movement.

Given the dynamic composition of protesters, and the diverse and expansive nature of the BLM movement, it is not surprising that a variety of slogans were used over the years to express the collective nature of grievances (Ince et al., 2017). Social movements use slogans that not only represent the goals of the movement but in many cases denote a catch phrase that demands a call to action. Also known in the literature as *frames*, slogans draw attention to the core issues that need to be addressed to achieve the goals. Defund the police is now arguably recognized as one of BLM's most controversial frames that strategically articulates to participants and target audiences the central goals of the movement in a way that assigns meaning, interprets the relevant cause, and mobilizes support (McCammon et al., 2004; Snow, 2004; Snow et al., 2007). Defund the police can be described as a strategic frame that resonates with protesters, as they seek to reimagine policing and push for racial equality in the United States.⁶

In this study, we interview participants who attended the 2020 March on Washington, which commemorated Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s historic "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963. This event attracted a wide spectrum of individuals that contained intergenerational activists and protesters with different levels of commitment to the BLM movement (Barthel et al., 2020; Bonilla, 2020). We use in-depth interviews with 28 protesters to qualitatively assess their understanding of defund the police and their support, or lack thereof, for these definitions. We also examine whether race and the type of protester influence the discourse around defunding the police. This study begins with a brief overview of the literature on race and policing, followed by a discussion on messaging and framing of social movements. We then discuss the various interpretations of defunding the police and Americans' attitudes toward the slogan.

1 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 | Racism and policing

Race and policing are closely intertwined, as the relationship between Black Americans and the police has been contentious throughout history. The police, first in the form of slave patrols and later in the form of organized police agencies, have often engaged in unfair, discriminatory practices against Black people (Del Carmen, 2008; Williams & Murphy, 1990). In addition to functioning as slave patrollers who surveilled and restricted the movement of Black civilians (Bass, 2001a, 2001b), law enforcement officials engaged in the torture and killings of freed Blacks (Lepore, 2020; Ralph, 2019). Moreover, the police have participated in efforts to suppress Black Americans via their enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act, Black Codes, Jim Crow, convict leasing, and “tough on crime” laws that surfaced as a form of backlash for the civil rights movement (Blackmon, 2008; Oshinski, 1996; Williams & Murphy, 1990). Consequently, it is unsurprising that compared to White and Latinx Americans, Black people are less likely to have confidence in the police (Gabbidon & Taylor Green, 2009; Weitzer, 1999; Weitzer & Tuch, 2002) and more likely to view the police as illegitimate and untrustworthy (Kirk & Papachristos, 2011; Tyler & Huo, 2002). The cumulative nature of negative police encounters fosters legal cynicism (Sampson & Bartusch, 1998), “a cultural orientation in which the law and its agents of control are viewed as ineffective and illegitimate” (Braga et al., 2019, p. 543).

Yet, despite mistrust of the police among many poor Black people, residents often resort to calling the police to settle interpersonal and community level problems (Bell, 2016; Hagan et al., 2018). Continual reliance on the police to both solve crime and handle non-criminal problems may explain mixed findings on whether high profile police killings reduce calls to the police in economically distressed Black communities (Desmond et al., 2016; 2020; Zoorob, 2020). In fact, residents from these neighborhoods often voice support for greater police presence, as well as more effective and fair policing that provides protective services (Forman, 2017; Weitzer & Tuch, 2006). Bell (2017) explains that this conflicted desire for protection from law enforcement stems from difficulty in imagining alternative kinds of social control and community development to address public safety in disadvantaged neighborhoods, which experience high rates of crime and victimization. However, part of the difficulty in imagining alternative kinds of social control and community development is the lack of institutional and other resources necessary to generate collective efficacy and social ties in these communities. These ties and mechanisms are prerequisites for the effective control of community crime (Bursik & Grasmik, 1993; McNulty & Bellair, 2003; Sampson et al., 2002).

Although there is some support for more police across racial groups, there is some considerable variation across demographic subgroups. For example, homeowners (individuals with higher socioeconomic status), women, and older residents are more likely to interact with the police to settle neighborhood problems (Bell, 2016; Forman, 2017). White civilians are more likely than Black civilians to believe that traffic stops are legitimate, and that police treatment is both respectful and appropriate (Cobbina, 2019; Engel, 2005). While White people report more favorable assessments of police than Black people, White individuals can be *othered* by the police, particularly when associating with Black men and traversing through racially mixed or majority-Black neighborhoods (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009). The experiences with and perceptions of Latinx Americans generally fall in between their Black and White counterparts (Lai & Zhao, 2010). Latinx and Black people are more likely to report having been a victim of racially biased policing and

have household members who report experiencing comparable treatment (Weitzer & Tuch, 2005). Moreover, direct and vicarious police encounters (i.e., knowledge learned about police through family, friends, media, or others) can not only affect perceptions of law enforcement (Cobbina, 2019) but raise levels of depression, anxiety, and stress among Black Americans (Bor et al., 2018).

Given the disparate attitudes held about police across categories of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and age, we expect that attitudes toward the current defund movement will differ by race, and that how Americans perceive the meaning of defunding will differ as well. Next, we explore framing and messaging in the operation of social movements.

1.2 | Frames and motivations in protests

Frames are an important component of any social movement and represent the core goals and identity of the movement at that particular time and context (Snow et al., 2007). Derived primarily from the work of Goffman (1974), frames denote “schemata of interpretation,” enabling people to “locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life and the world at large” (p. 21). The use of frames is helpful, as it aids in providing meaning to events and thereby serves to both organize experiences and guide action (Benford & Snow, 2000). The development and selection of frames are often strategic, generally chosen in response to the movement’s counter-group coupled with the message the protest group wants to impart (Chakravarty & Chaudhuri, 2012; Oliver & Johnston, 2000). Moreover, the intended audience, larger political environment, and the desire of the group to gain credibility while providing legitimacy to their collective concerns all impact the selection of frames (Coy & Woehrle, 1996; Rohlinger, 2002).

Previous studies have found that effective frames are critical for movement success (Benford & Snow, 2000). Through their implementation and messaging, social movement actors can purposely do the following: interpret arguments in their favor, rationally articulate the problems at stake, transform the hearts and minds of people, inspire potential participants, strengthen solidarity in the process, and rebut counter frames, if present (McCammon et al., 2007; Snow, 2004). Moreover, an important feature of an effective frame is one that has cultural resonance with participants (i.e., it connects with the participants in a way that makes their individual experience of grievance part of the community’s shared experience; Chakravarty & Chaudhuri, 2012; Trevizo, 2006). The feature of resonance that the frame represents is crucial along with motivations of participants for movement successes (Chakravarty & Chaudhuri, 2012; McCammon, 2009).

Collective action takes place when grievances—both perceptions and lived experiences—give rise to collective identity and are accompanied by individuals’ motivations to channel feelings of anger and frustrations toward movement goals (Jasper, 2004; Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2017). Further, motivation plays a decisive role in transforming grievances to collective action with the belief that actions have the potential to alter the existing social structure in positive ways (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2017; Van Zomeren et al., 2004). Thus, a nuanced examination of protester’s meanings assigned to the slogan of defunding the police can help researchers better understand their motivations for demanding social change, and thereby provide recommendations for police reforms that address the heart of the problem of police led violence. In the next section, we explore the methods proposed to transform policing in America, particularly regarding reducing racial disparities and use of force.

1.3 | Meanings of “Defund the Police”

Public perceptions of the term defund the police are complicated by interchangeable terminologies used to describe different actions and outcomes (Bilal, 2020). To provide some clarity on these different terms, we summarize the relevant literature below.

1.3.1 | Reform

One of the most frequently proposed remedies to the problem of police brutality against Black civilians has been police reform. President Obama’s 2015 Task Force on 21st Century Policing outlined a series of reform principles and strategies to increase community trust and police legitimacy. Over the past 5 years, police departments across the nation adopted reforms based on this model, including diversification, demilitarization, implicit bias and de-escalation training, community policing, and accountability policies, such as body-worn cameras and use of force restrictions (Arora et al., 2019). In the wake of protests, Campaign Zero, a non-profit organization established by Ferguson activists, has pushed for transformational police reform calling for local, state, and federal officials to end broken windows policing, increase community oversight, make more stringent use of force policies and accountability, end for-profit policing, demilitarize the police, and renegotiate union contracts among other things (Campaign Zero, 2020). In 2020, the U.S. House of Representatives approved the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act (H.R. 7120, 2020). Touted as a comprehensive police reform bill, it bans chokeholds and no-knock warrants, ends racial and religious profiling, establishes uniform policies for use of force, limits the transfer of military equipment to local and state police departments, mandates data collection on police encounters, requires body-worn cameras, and ends qualified immunity so that individuals can recover damages in civil court when officers violate their constitutional rights (Weiner, 2021).

However, reform is challenging, as there are roughly 18,000 federal, state, county, and local police departments in the United States (Banks et al., 2016). America’s emphasis on state and local government autonomy from the federal government has led to substantial diversity in policing systems across cities, counties, and states (USA Facts, 2021). For example, each police department has different legal and geographic jurisdictions that range from single police departments to agencies with more than 30,000 officers (Banks et al., 2016). Given the sheer number coupled with the fact that most policing is local, decentralized, and fragmented, it is challenging to apply reform to every single police department across the nation.

1.3.2 | Reallocate

Although police reform is a common mantra, many activists remain pessimistic about the possibility of successful reform. Some activists and organizers have made calls to defund the police via a divest/invest model. In this context, defunding the police refers to *divesting* funds from policing budgets and *investing* in social service agencies to keep communities safe and help people in highly policed communities develop and thrive. Each year, America spends more than \$115 billion on policing (Urban Institute, 2017), making up 20–45% of the general funds in major cities (The Center for Popular Democracy, 2021).

While police budgets remain bloated, the police are not as successful as people think at solving violent crime. The metric commonly used to measure police effectiveness at solving crime is a “clearance rate,” which refers to the proportion of reported crimes for which police arrest someone and turn him or her over to prosecution for a reported crime (Baughman, 2020). While most assume that police are effective at solving crime, the clearance rates for violent crime are quite low. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Uniform Crime Report, 38% of homicides, 67% of rapes, nearly 70% of robberies, and 48% of aggravated assaults go unsolved each year (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2018). It seems unlikely that increased police funding has reduced crime rates in the United States.

However, proactive policing has become the hallmark of modern policing strategies in the past few decades (Fagan et al., 2010). The logic is that law enforcement should proactively patrol communities and maintain order through aggressive low-level policing as opposed to a reactive policy of sending police when called (Kubrin et al., 2010; Weisburd, 2016; Wilson & Kelling, 1982). Even though completed crimes may not always be solved, proponents of proactive policing assert that increased police stops, low-level arrests, and quality of life summons deter serious criminal activity by signaling that the neighborhood is being surveilled and deviance will not be tolerated (Bratton & Kelling, 2015).

Yet, there is serious concern that proactive policing in areas where it has been pervasively deployed diverts funds from services, resources, and infrastructure needed to keep communities safe and healthy. While government expenditure has dramatically increased spending on policing over the past 30 years, vital investments in social safety net programs, such as mental health services, housing subsidies, schools, youth programs, and food benefits programs go unfulfilled (Cloud, 2014). Consequently, these investment choices have had deleterious effects on poor communities and communities of color, such as reduction in high school graduation rates and increases in adolescent crimes and confinement (Oliver, 2008).

1.3.3 | Disband

Disbanding police departments refers to the elimination of one or more units within the police department, including the entire agency, and starting over with new systems, structures, and policies (O’Rourke et al., 2021). According to King (2014), “a police department is disbanded when it is no longer funded or sanctioned by its host government. Without official sanction from the locale’s government, the police officers can no longer arrest people and that agency is disbanded” (p. 669). Police organizations can be disbanded due to conflict with other governmental organizations (e.g., rancor between the police and the mayor), police misconduct (especially by high-level administrators, such as sheriffs or chiefs), or budget cuts (King, 2009, 2014). When departments are dismantled, policing those jurisdictions is usually handled by a higher-level agency, such as the county sheriff or state police (King, 2009, 2014).

Following Michael Brown’s killing, there were calls to disband the Ferguson Police Department and rebuild it from the ground up (Chaney, 2015). Commenters called for the department to be overhauled and establish a new process to restructure the department and vet potential candidates (Chaney, 2015). It was noted that Darren Wilson, the Ferguson officer who shot and killed Michael Brown, was formerly employed in the Jennings Police Department, which was disbanded over concerns of corruption and excessive force (Gupta, 2014). A handful of jurisdictions have done this, most notably Camden, New Jersey (Zernike, 2012), which dissolved its 141-year-old police department in 2012 and replaced it with a new one after corruption rendered

the agency beyond reform (Weichselbaum & Lewis, 2020). The county rehired 40% of their staff, retrained officers, revised their jobs, and relaunched a county-level force with a renewed focus on community service (Panetta, 2020). There is little evidence, however, that disbanding has a meaningful impact on police misconduct given the small number of jurisdictions that have disbanded.

1.3.4 | Abolish

While advocates of disbanding the police seek to revamp the police department, abolitionists call for a complete end to policing (Vitale, 2017). Advocates of police abolition recognize that slavery was embedded in American institutions and those institutions supported White supremacy and continue to do so (McDowell & Fernandez, 2018). Given that American policing is so closely tied to the institution of slavery, abolitionists assert that policing as an institution reinforces race and class inequalities by design; thus, it cannot be successfully reformed (Vitale, 2017). This is particularly true in the southern United States, where police agencies were born from slave patrols, whose purpose was to apprehend runaway slaves and who worked closely with White supremacy organizations like the Ku Klux Klan (Hadden, 2003). Northern colonies also had watchmen by private civilians who were employed to police the streets and northern cities like Boston acted as slave catchers (Williams & Murphy, 1990). For abolitionists, the problem with policing is not the prevailing “police-community relations” narrative, but instead anti-Black racism and White supremacy, which is visible through state sanctioned violence against Black people (Bracey, 2016; Ransby, 2018; Tillery, 2019). Hence, police reform is viewed by abolitionists as inadequate, as it does little to address systemic racism in police departments and serves to enhance the legitimacy of the police without building power in affected communities.

Recognizing that the problem is not *within* police institutions but the institution of policing itself, whose agents, according to abolitionists, are co-conspirators of violence, the only way to end police violence is to build a society where it is possible to address harm without relying on systemic oppression (i.e., formal police organizations and functions; Kaba, 2020). Many activists maintain that not only have police failed to make everyone safe but “reform has only strengthened their most toxic ingrained practices” (Kaepernick Publishing, 2020). Abolitionists argue that the best method to remove the need for police is to solve the social issues at the root of violence in our society (Gimbel & Mohammad, 2019; Vitale, 2017). That is, if people had access to quality healthcare, affordable housing, good jobs, and education, there would be less crime and less need for police. Others argue that radical action is the only way to successfully eliminate policing, and such actions must avoid “liberal attempts at co-optation, incorporation, and/or reconciliation” (McDowell & Fernandez, 2018, p. 388). Overall, police abolitionists seek to shrink and ultimately end policing and “replace police with empowered communities working to solve their own problems” (Vitale, 2021, p. 30).

The multiple definitions and understanding of defunding can be understood as falling on a continuum. We present this continuum in Figure 1, ranging from more liberal to more radical. In the next section, we discuss preliminary findings from polling data to help begin to understand how the public views the phrase defund the police.

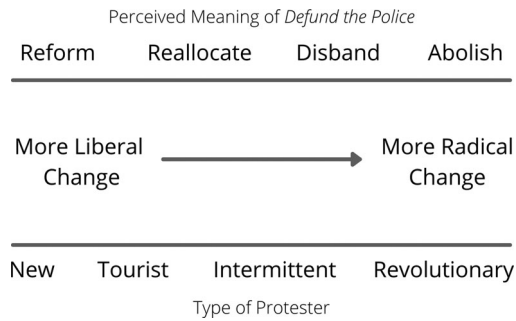


FIGURE 1 The continuum of defund the police and support by protester type

1.4 | Attitude polls on defunding the police

BLM leaders refer to defunding as a “divest/invest” model, which entails taking funds from police departments and investing them in Black communities (BLM Global Network, 2020a; Perano, 2020). Public support for defunding depends heavily on how polling questions are asked (North, 2020). Some polling data have indicated that a majority of Americans do not support the phrase defund the police (Elbeshbishi & Quarshie, 2021; HuffPost/YouGov, 2020; Karson, 2020); yet may be more likely to support statements that funding for police agencies should be reallocated to tackle social problems (Ipsos, 2021; Karson, 2020; Rakich, 2020). Others find greater support for police accountability but little support for cutting spending, but these views are highly dependent upon respondent’s political party, with Republicans less likely to support increased accountability from officers using excessive force (Crabtree, 2020; Milam & McElwee, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2020).

While polling data are useful for understanding perceptions of what it means to defund the police, a better strategy may be to ask Americans how *they* view this phrase (i.e., using qualitative rather than quantitative inquiry). This is especially important given the degree of misinformation that has been spread about defunding the police (Kamisar & Demaria, 2020). In this study, we ask protesters who attended the Commitment March on Washington in August 2020 to provide their perceptions of the meaning of defunding the police.

2 | METHODOLOGY

2.1 | Sample

Our data for this study consist of survey and in-depth interviews with 28 protesters who attended the 2020 Commitment March located in Washington, DC.⁷ Interviews were conducted immediately after the march, in September and October 2020.⁸ Respondents range in age from 23 to 74, with a mean age of 40 years old. Participation in the study was voluntary. Protesters in the sample were promised confidentiality and paid \$40 for their participation.⁹

We attempted to identify a mixed group of protesters who varied across race, gender, and age, which yielded a nonprobability sample. We used several approaches to recruit protesters to participate in the study. First, a flyer describing the objective of the research project was placed on the first and second author’s Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts, which was disseminated

to others on social media. Second, an organization printed fliers and placed them for pick-up at a grab-n-go stop prior to the march for participants to pick up and participate if they desired.¹⁰ Third, at the end of the march, fliers were distributed by the first author to participants who attended the March on Washington.¹¹ Finally, at the end of each interview, research participants were asked to inform others who attended the March on Washington to reach out to the project manager if they were interested in taking part in the study.

2.2 | Data and analytical strategy

Data collection began with the administration of a survey, and respondents were asked to participate in a digitally recorded interview that was completed the same day as the survey.¹² Respondents were given the opportunity to decline participation or having the interview recorded; however, none did. The digital recordings from the interviews were later transcribed and serve as the primary data source, whereas the survey interviews provide supplemental demographic data. We collected demographic information pertaining to race, gender, age, marital status, children, education, employment status, annual income, place of residence, and political affiliation.¹³ In addition, the survey provided baseline information about protesters' overall experiences with, and perceptions of, police. Respondents were questioned if, and how many times they or others they know have been harassed or mistreated by the police. They were also asked how often they believe police do a good job enforcing the law, respond quickly to calls, work hard to solve crimes, are easy to talk to, are respectful, do a good job preventing crime, and harass or mistreat people. Our goal was to collect data that could provide a relatively holistic assessment of protesters' interactions with, and attitudes toward, police.

The in-depth interviews were semistructured with open-ended questions that allowed for considerable probing. Respondents were first asked to describe their experience at the March on Washington and what motivated them to participate amid a pandemic. Then, they were questioned about their experiences with police unrelated to protesting. Respondents were asked to provide their definition and views of defunding the police. They were also asked to discuss their reactions to the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Additional questions were asked regarding how parents prepare their children to navigate police interactions. To tap into social activism, respondents were asked if they took part in prior BLM protests and to detail their experiences with police and protesters while demonstrating. Then, they were asked about the significance of the March on Washington and how to build security for Black people. Finally, they were questioned about their perceptions on how America is to move forward as a nation. For this study, we focus on how protesters define and perceive calls to defund the police.

In our analysis, we used Cobbina's (2019) framework for identifying protester types, including revolutionary, intermittent, and tourist protesters. *Revolutionary protesters* were those who reported having protested daily or every other day during the height of protests in summer 2020 or may have experienced aggressive police tactics and threats to their well-being, yet continued to protest. In general, they expressed a deep level of commitment to the protest movement. *Intermittent protesters* were individuals who participated in protests at least three or more times and were committed to the cause. Overall, they held a middle-ground commitment to the fight for social justice. *Tourist protesters* were classified as people who took part in protests less than three times or expressed more curiosity than commitment about the social movement. Generally, their level of commitment was characterized as being in and out.¹⁴ We identified a fourth protester type in

this sample that we categorize as *New protesters*, who were individuals that had not taken part in the BLM protests prior to the 2020 March on Washington.¹⁵

We analyzed protesters' narratives using an inductive approach that garnered themes that were identified from the data rather than from preconceived notions (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Coding was used as part of this analytic process. The first, second, and third authors repeatedly reviewed each narrative, extracting text of protesters' definitions regarding the phrase defund the police. After viewing the relevant text, the first author developed a codebook as to how defund the police was defined. Using the codebook, the coding team carefully reviewed the narratives and coded the data independently. The codebook was further revised, and any discrepancies were discussed and resolved by the coding team. The data were subsequently categorized into themes and subthemes. To ensure the rigor of the inductive process, we analyzed protesters' racial background and drew comparisons based on protester type. After coding each account, we tabulated the frequency of each category to identify the strengths of the patterns we uncovered. Care was taken to ensure that the concepts that were developed and illustrations provided reflect the most common patterns in protesters' accounts.

3 | FINDINGS

3.1 | Sample characteristics

Table 1 provides a basic description of the sample, which included 23 women, two transgender women, two men, and one non-binary individual (see Appendix A). The mean age of participants was 40, and about half of the participants were Black. Most had a college degree, and about half were unemployed at the time of the March on Washington. Of those who identified a formal political stance, most reported being liberals or radical liberals and identified as either Democrat or independent. Finally, in terms of protesting experience, most participants were categorized as new protesters or tourists, though almost 40% were more experienced protesters.¹⁶

Table 2 provides an overview of participants' reported interactions with and perceptions of police. While half of the sample reported having been personally harassed by police, almost all participants noted that they had witnessed others being harassed. Specifically, 50% of White participants, 55% of Black participants, and 75% of those identifying as two or more races reported being personally harassed or mistreated by the police. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, fully two-thirds of the sample believe that police often harass or mistreat people, and all but one participant stated that this occurs often or some of the time. Despite these reported direct and vicarious experiences, most participants thought police do a good job enforcing laws, respond quickly to calls, and work hard to solve crimes often or some of the time. However, participants were more likely to say that police are only sometimes or almost never easy to talk to or respectful of people.

3.1.1 | Defund the police slogan

Among the 28 protesters in our sample, five viewed the term or hashtag #DefundThePolice as problematic or recognized that others did. Such sentiments were common across protester types. Specifically, some believed that the term *defund* is misleading, resulting in confusion regarding its meaning. Maddy, a White woman who was new to protesting, cautioned, "I'm careful with using that expression just because I think it's being misconstrued." Others were aware that the term has

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics of participants (N = 28)

	N	%
Gender		
Male	2	7.1
Female	23	82.1
Transgender female	2	7.1
Nonbinary/genderqueer	1	3.6
Age		
Mean	40	
Range	23–74	
Race		
White	10	35.7
Black	13	46.4
Hispanic/Latinx	1	3.6
Two or more races	4	14.3
Marital status		
Single	13	46.4
Married	6	21.4
Divorced	5	17.9
Separated	1	3.6
Cohabiting	3	10.7
Children		
Yes	15	53.6
No	13	46.4
Education		
HS diploma/GED	2	7.1
Associate's degree	3	10.7
Some college	4	14.3
Bachelor's degree	11	39.3
Master's degree	7	25.0
Law degree	1	3.6
Employment Status		
Unemployed	14	50.0
Employed part-time	1	3.6
Employed full-time	11	39.3
Retired	2	7.1
Income level		
<\$15,000	3	10.7
\$15,000–29,999	8	28.6
\$30,000–49,999	8	28.6
\$50,000–74,999	5	17.9
\$75,000–99,999	3	10.7
Did not want to answer	1	3.6

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	N	%
Political affiliation		
Democrat	19	67.9
Republican	0	0.0
Independent	8	28.6
No affiliation	1	3.6
Political stance		
Radical left	11	39.3
Left	7	25.0
Moderate	9	32.1
Right	0	0.0
Radical right	0	0.0
None	1	3.6
Protester type		
New protester	9	32.1
Tourist	8	28.6
Intermittent	5	17.9
Revolutionary	6	21.4

TABLE 2 Participants' interactions with and perceptions of police (N = 25)*

Police interaction	Yes	No	
Arrested as an adult	11 (39.3%)	14 (50.0%)	
Personally harassed by PO	14 (50.0%)	11 (39.3%)	
Witnessed others harassed by PO	24 (85.7%)	1 (3.6%)	
Perceptions of Police			
	Often	Sometimes	Almost never
PO do good job enforcing laws	7 (25.0%)	13 (46.4%)	5 (17.9%)
PO respond quickly to calls	5 (17.9%)	15 (53.6%)	5 (17.9%)
PO work hard to solve crimes	5 (17.9%)	14 (50.0%)	6 (21.4%)
PO are easy to talk to	3 (10.7%)	8 (28.6%)	14 (50.0%)
PO are respectful of people	2 (7.1%)	12 (42.9%)	11 (39.3%)
PO do a good job preventing crime	1 (3.6%)	11 (39.3%)	13 (46.4%)
PO harass or mistreat people	18 (64.3%)	6 (21.4%)	1 (3.6%)

*Three participants (10.7% of sample) did not provide responses to questions regarding interactions with/perceptions of police.

resulted in pushback from those who believe that it means eliminating police entirely. Of the term defund the police, Carole, a White revolutionary protester, lamented “everybody’s all up in arms about the wording of it.” She continued: “People get so scared when they hear defund the police, because then they’re like, ‘Oh, well, everyone’s going to wreak havoc and there’s not going to be law and order anymore,’ and that’s not the case.” In a similar vein, Anyiah, a Black revolutionary protester, stated:

I think when people hear the term defunding, they think of disbanding, dismantling, like no longer existing, and that scares people. That causes mass pandemonium, so maybe a better term will be like reallocation of funds or redistribution of funds or something like that because [reallocation] definitely needs to happen.

Those who were not in favor of the slogan recognized that the phrase was often misinterpreted and vulnerable to deliberate distortion. Cognizant that words have consequences, a handful of participants in our study thought it was time to come up with a new phrase to avoid taking from the overall message of police violence and racial inequity.

3.1.2 | Abolish the police

In their definition of defunding the police, nearly one-third of participants in the sample referred to abolishing the police and many pointed out that defunding was not synonymous with abolition. Taylor, a White tourist protester, asserted that “defunding the police to me isn’t about abolishing the police.” For many new and tourist protesters, police abolition was not something they supported because of the belief that police were needed to maintain law and order. Of the police, Willie, a new Black protester, stated emphatically, “don’t ban them. We need them.” A few people reported fears that anarchy would arise without the police. For instance, in her discussion of defund the police, Maddy, a White woman who was new to protesting, noted, “I don’t think that most people who say we should defund the police, I don’t think most of them mean we should just abolish the police department and just have chaos reign tomorrow.” By contrast, Lisa, a Black tourist protester, defined the term as the elimination of the police force, which she did not support:

There needs to be a new system drawn up. I don’t know if defunding the police will be the correct thing because we do need someone to establish law and order . . . if they completely defund the police, then who’s going to keep law and order? They’re going to turn it into a purge like situation. Even the military is having problems, so we can’t rely on them. I don’t think defunding the police would be the correct answer.

Lisa tied her concerns to the belief that ending the institution of policing would result in no one enforcing the law, thereby leading to chaos and confusion.

While most did not support police abolition, four participants in our sample who had prior protesting experience did approve of doing away with law enforcement altogether.¹⁷ Bethanie, a Black intermittent protester, stated that defunding the police means “to be totally . . . not reformed [but] transformed.” For Bethanie, support was tied to the fact that “after 9/11, I watched the police become . . . much more militarized . . . After 9/11 . . . the suburban police in my neighborhood . . . put the bars on the inside . . . of the police car . . . [and I thought] this is extreme.” Similarly, Camille, a White revolutionary protester, asserted:

I do think we should abolish police. I think we need to reimagine like a different way of operating in society and handling issues whether that’s like healthcare [or] mental health issues. I just don’t think it has to be police that show up for those things. They often make [the situation] worse.

However, Camille also noted that it is unclear how violent crimes would be handled without law enforcement: “The only thing that is questionable to me is like violent situations, but police don’t

handle that well anyway. So, I think they should be abolished and there should be a reimaging of what would be the best way to handle every kind of situation in our society.” While a few participants in our study supported the abolition of police forces in the long-term, they were willing to settle for what they could get in the short-term to end police brutality. That is, reallocate resources to invest in marginalized individuals and communities, which we describe below.

3.1.3 | Reallocate resources

In our study, 20 protesters defined defunding as reducing the police budget and instead investing in social services. This definition was common across protesters of all types.¹⁸ When asked what defunding the police means, Lyn, a Black revolutionary protester, said, “I just think that that means kind of taking away funding Defunding the police to me would mean cut that funding . . . [and] reallocate that back to mental health services, schooling, housing, affordable housing for the people in the neighborhoods that they’re over-policing anyways.” Charlotte, a Black woman who was new to protesting, stated that defund the police refers to “downsize[ing] the number of cops or take away . . . funding . . . and putting it in to maybe—rearrange some of the budgeting priorities so that some of the money go[es] to Boys Clubs and Girls Clubs, for example.” From this reallocation, Charlotte expected youth in the neighborhood to receive access to after school programs and become empowered to thrive as young adults.

Of the 20 protesters who defined defunding the police as reallocating resources from the police department to social service agencies, 18 were in support. Half of those who supported defunding the police favored this approach because there remained a general perception, especially among revolutionary protesters, that police are ill-equipped in handling certain situations. For instance, Carol, a White woman, asserted that in general police “don’t have the training that they need to deal with 90% of the calls that they do deal with.” Aniyah, a Black woman, agreed, declaring that a lot of calls can turn violent because police officers “match your intensity” when upset because they “don’t know how to talk to people . . . [or] de-escalate a situation.” And Lyn, a Black woman, lamented that officers are ill-equipped to handle issues pertaining to mental health:

When somebody calls to do a welfare check, like if they think their friend is Oding [overdosing] or committing suicide—I’ve [heard] so many people say, “I tried to kill myself. The police busted into my house and then treated me like a criminal. I wasn’t hurting anybody else. I was trying to commit suicide, and they made it 10 times worse by handcuffing me, dragging me to the hospital, handcuffing me to the bed.”

While police are certainly concerned with ensuring that individuals who are suicidal do not harm themselves or others, Lyn’s concern that law enforcement can further aggravate a crisis and treat people with suicidal tendencies as “criminals” is noteworthy since individuals who are suicidal need access to mental health treatment.

As a result, 16 protesters in our study underscored the necessity of meeting people’s individual needs to prevent and reduce crime. Carol, a White revolutionary protester, believed it is necessary to “reallocate resources to helping people with mental health issue[s] because that helps with [reducing] the suicide [rate].” For that reason, many called for police to step back from crisis calls and instead rely on mental health clinicians to handle such matters. Natalie, a new White protester, asserted that much of the “services that police provide could be done better, more efficiently, and less violently by trained medical health professionals.”

Others pointed to the need to direct funds toward improving the educational system. Bethanie, a Black intermittent protester, argued that it is critical to “put some money into . . . activities [like educational resources] that are preventative [because] . . . that money could make such a huge difference.” Likewise, Jenna, a White revolutionary protester, highlights that defunding the police means the following:

It would be putting that money towards actually funding the schools because the Dayton schools are failing and not in small part because the schools are policed and the children are Black. That money could go to so many other community resources that would truly improve the community.

The need to reinvest in education, anti-poverty initiatives, and healthcare has come to a head given the large proportion of funds police departments receive each year. After learning that in many cities a large percentage of the budget is spent on police departments (McCarthy, 2020; Vitulli, 2020), nine protesters in the study called for a reduction in the amount of money spent on law enforcement. Jaylin, a Black revolutionary protester, complained “there’s an exorbitant amount of money that is given to police and police departments.” And Katherine, a White intermittent protester, asserted, “stop allowing [police] to buy expensive, ridiculous cop cars and have these beautiful, elegant department buildings and basically wasting all of our money.” Similarly, Natalie, a White woman new to protesting, articulated:

Police budgets are usually a huge, huge percentage of every city’s budget, and it’s even worse when you start looking at sheriffs. Yeah, I mean, I would like to see them at least funded more proportionately to investments in the community. So, after your police budget, there’s 50 percent of your city budget, and I think that’s out of whack with the services that police actually provide.

Instead, Natalie wanted to see trained medical health professionals respond to civilian calls for service and address issues of homelessness. For many, calls to defund the police involve scaling back on the amount of funds police departments receive.

Four protesters in the study were insistent that they supported defunding the police because they wanted to see a demilitarization of law enforcement. Katherine, a White intermittent protester, claimed, “[t]here’s no reason that police departments should be able to deck themselves out in military grade equipment for peaceful protesters.” Aniyah, a Black revolutionary protester, stated after 9/11, she noticed that “the police became heavily militarized. And I didn’t get that. I felt like we have a National Guard, we have a military. Why do you have cannons? Why do you have tanks?” She continued: “When I think of defunding the police, that’s where I think of cutting costs because that’s where I see most of the money being spent.”

While some had unfavorable views of law enforcement, others recognized that police are called on to do too much. Police are expected to manage and deal with a host of societal problems, which some viewed as unfair and unrealistic. Emily, a White woman who was new to protesting, wisely noted: “Police themselves have said they’re expected to wear too many different hats and do too many different things. I think that if they did reallocate or separate the responsibilities of that, [then] it’s not just down to them to take care of every issue that comes up.” Likewise, Taylor, a White tourist protester, asserted:

[Defunding the police] takes some of the pressure off of police so they aren't the ones that always have to do the heavy lifting, right? Like we can disperse responsibility here into other departments and other services to take some of that pressure of being the superhero and being the one who responds to every call. They don't have to do that anymore. And I think that would take a lot of stress out of the job as well. Knowing that they aren't the ones who have to be the catch all for every social problem that ever occurs. And so, when I hear defunding the police, I'm hearing reallocating money to other services that would probably be much better suited to handle the social problem that needs to be addressed.

Since only around 4% of calls for police service are in response to incidents involving violence (Asher & Horwitz, 2020), many participants believe that other agencies are better suited to handle non-violent calls.

While there were a significant number of protesters in our study who supported reallocating resources from the police department to communities, a small number of protesters who were new or tourist protesters did not approve. Three protesters provided distinct reasons for being unsupportive of defunding the police. Kalinda, a Black tourist protester, expressed the need for funds to be available for officers to work overtime. She asserted: "we definitely want police to be able to answer calls and emergencies and things like that . . . [So police] may actually need that overtime." Others remained less concerned about continuing to fund the salary of officers. Lucia, a new Latina protester, simply stated that "reducing the amount of money that the police force gets for its programs" would not be beneficial. And Natalie, a new White protester, asserted that while she thinks defunding the police "could totally be functional," she explained why she does not hold much hope for it:

I feel like the way that police protect themselves and protect their budgets and protect each other . . . I'm more pro-abolishing the police than I am defunding because I feel like they'll find a way to still be terrible with less money.

Lack of faith in the police force coupled with a reduction in police budget led Natalie to become cynical about officers' ability to perform their jobs adequately with fewer resources.

3.1.4 | Police reform

Although most protesters in our study were in favor of reallocating dollars away from the police department to invest in communities, three respondents supported the idea of shifting funds *within* the police department.¹⁹ Though none of the three respondents defined defunding as reform, they did call for additional training of officers in a move toward police reform. Lucia, a Hispanic new protester clarified: "why not educate the police as I said? Not empower [but] enlighten the police." Michelle, a Black tourist protester, explained: "I think some of that money needs to be put toward better training, bringing in other resources to help them with some of the things that they do, and just relearning. They need to relearn what they have been taught." Likewise, Amber, a Black tourist protester, asserted with passion: "If you're going to put that money somewhere, put that money to train these idiots . . . [P]ut some money into training these people, so that they feel like they can de-escalate a f*cking situation." Lucia was more specific in her explanation of the need for shifting funds within the police department toward services that, while essential,

cannot be performed by the police and require the employment of trained professionals. Calling it “refund,” compared to defund, Lucia explained, “more focus on mental health would cost more money. That would take time out of their day. That would take having a professional available for that. That requires more funds.” For Lucia, the shifting of funds toward mental health, along with education of police with the goal to enlighten the officers was essentially what defunding the police implied.

4 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Opinion polls remain popular methods for quickly gauging public perception around controversial slogans, such as defund the police (Rakick, 2020). Polls on defund the police reveal inconsistent perceptions about its meaning. Some polls show that the public is opposed to defunding the police (Elbeshbish & Quarshie, 2021) and others indicate that many Americans want to see a change as to how the police departments operate (Murray, 2020). However, polls often lack the ability to capture nuanced explanations to better understand complex issues, and responses can be shaped by how questions are asked (Dionne & Mann, 2003). In addition, most polls seek responses from the average civilian who may or may not have given much thought to the issue, which can result in uninformed views. Few studies consider how defund the police is both perceived and understood by protesters pushing for social change. The current study extends previous research through our comparative qualitative analysis of the perceptions of various types of protesters with differing levels of commitment to the BLM movement. Our study findings highlight the significance of protester type as a way through which protesters understood and supported the concept of defund the police.

Our findings underscore that protester type shaped how participants understood and supported defunding. One-third of participants in the sample referenced abolishing the police but many new and tourist protesters across race expressed reservations with making such a move to end policing. They viewed it as a problematic outcome for communities, perceiving that a lack of surveillance would lead to anarchy, especially when it comes to handling violent crimes. In contrast, a few revolutionary and intermittent protesters articulated that the police are ineffective in handling civilian calls to service and supported doing away with law enforcement altogether.

Our research also revealed that revolutionary, intermittent, tourist, and new protesters in our sample all perceived defunding as reallocation of funds from policing to other agencies funded by local municipalities. Support for reallocation was made for several reasons. First, police are often called on to intervene in non-violent cases in which they may often escalate situations. Thus, instead of supporting increased police budgets that disproportionately penalize Black and brown people, most protesters in our study argued that channeling some of that funding to often neglected areas like education, public health, housing, and youth services would help both the community and police departments. Second, many asserted that the decision to invest in police and prisons instead of residents within under-resourced communities fail to make community residents safer. These assertions are in line with studies revealing that a living wage, educational opportunity, affordable and stable housing, and access to holistic health services are more effective in crime prevention than the police (King et al., 2005; Lochner & Moretti, 2004; McVay et al., 2004).

Calls to reallocate dollars away from the police are couched in decades of research in the criminal legal system that has advocated for locating internal sources of social control within the community. For example, consistent with the call to reinvest government funding away from policing

and toward mechanisms that improve personal well-being, Cullen (1994) identified social support as an organizing principle for studying crime. He postulated that crime is better combated not by exerting greater levels of coercive control but by increasing social support that involves “assistance from communities, social networks, and confiding partners in meeting the instrumental and expressive needs of individuals” (Colvin et al., 2002, p. 20). Further, there is significant evidence that increased social capital is correlated with reductions in crime (Cullen, 1994; Cullen & Wright, 1997), as it reduces the impact of strain by providing necessary resources. This, in turn, allows individuals to cope with adversity and strain, which is produced by the structure and physical conditions of their community through noncriminal means (Cullen & Wright, 1997). In addition, informal sources of social control located within communities often lead to greater social cohesion and reductions in crime (Sharkey et al., 2017). In contrast, increased police surveillance and negative police interactions amplify deviant attitudes among youth rather than deter future criminal behavior (Del Toro et al., 2019).

Scholars also indicate that the key to establishing peaceful societies is equity in education and work infrastructure (Lochner & Moretti, 2004; Ray, 2020; Uggen & Shannon, 2014). Moreover, a review of 60 years of spending on state and local police shows no correlation nationally between spending and crime rates (Bump, 2020). Thus, reallocating funding away from police departments to other sectors of government may prove to be more advantageous for reducing both crime and police violence (Ray, 2020).

Also notable is race did not appear to shape the discourse around and support of defunding the police, as racial identity was not discussed by participants. This is surprising, as the literature shows significant racial differences in perceptions of police (Kirk & Papachristos, 2011; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998), with Black Americans tending to have unfavorable views of police compared to White Americans (Cobbina, 2019; Gabbidon & Taylor Green, 2009; Tyler & Huo, 2002). Although we can only speculate with the data at hand, it may be that since our sample consisted of participants at an event supporting Black Americans and the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that White participants were more likely to have beliefs that align with Black participants.

Finally, a small number of participants viewed, and/or recognized that others viewed defund the police as a problematic slogan that perhaps signaled a move toward anarchy, misidentifying one of the major goals of the BLM movement. While defund the police is certainly a controversial slogan, in general slogans are appealing because they are simple, attract attention, and motivate supporters (Denton, 2009). As social symbols, slogans can unite, divide, and convert, ultimately leading to individual or social action (Denton, 2009). Yet, oversimplification not only complicates meaning (which is a problem with all slogans) but leaves slogans open to criticism and misunderstanding. Defund the police has been misconstrued (even among some protesters in our study) as eliminating law enforcement, inviting mayhem, and distracting from incremental police reform (Skinnell, 2020). Today, 18 months after the frame reignited the BLM movement, defund the police may have lost some of its appeal. Yet, while it may be tempting to change the slogan to a more palatable term, such as “repurpose money,” “reallocate funds,” or “transform police,” these words undercut the seriousness of the movement, as it suggests that policing is something that can be easily fixed.

On the contrary, evidence shows that over the life course, one in every 1,000 Black men in the United States can expect to be killed by police, making police fatal force the leading cause of death for young Black men ahead of cancer (Edwards et al., 2019). Police kill Black men and women at disproportionate rates, as they are more than three times as likely than White Americans to be killed by police (Schwartz & Jahn, 2020). Black people encompass a subset of the American population that the public, including police, are trained to view as criminal and fear

(Eberhardt et al., 2004). The relationship between Black people and law enforcement has been contentious throughout American history, which is marked by legally sanctioned enslavement, judicially authorized discriminatory laws, and socially accepted dehumanization that span more than 400 years (Cobbina, 2019; Owusu-Bempah, 2017; Williams & Murphy, 1990). During the earliest period of American development, racial hierarchies occurred to rationalize the enslavement and subordination of Black people in which Blackness was associated with bondage, inferiority, and uncivilization and whiteness became associated with freedom, superiority, and civilization (Demond & Emirbayer, 2009; Jordan, 1968). Enslaved Black people were commonly portrayed as “criminal,” threatening, animalistic, and dangerous (Fishman, 2006). This racialized history has had devastating lingering effects, which shape crime patterns (Alexander, 2010; Butler, 2017). The overrepresentation of Black people as victims of police violence is tied to the overreliance on police to address structural problems. Defunding the police offers a solution to addressing the root causes of crime by ameliorating the conditions that give rise to high levels of crime and making investments that increase economic mobility.

Our study is not without limitations. First, the gender distribution of our sample was heavily skewed. Apart from two men and one non-binary individual, all the respondents in the study identified as women. Given the history of BLM as an organization that was founded by three Black women, and the increasing focus on intersectionality within the BLM movement, it could be that more women compared to men are drawn to the protests. In the last few decades, women, especially from minority groups, are increasingly becoming more politically active worldwide (Safa, 1990; Schmink & Gomez-Garcia, 2015). In addition, women are more likely to volunteer than men, and volunteer bias is common in qualitative interviews (Affleck et al., 2012). Second, just over half of our sample was unemployed. It is possible that the high number was driven by the financial incentive for taking part in the study, as the research took place amid a public health pandemic in which the United States faced an economic crisis. Another limitation is that we used a convenience sample, which suffers from bias. Any conclusion from these comparisons must be regarded with caution, given the modest number of respondents in our study. As with most qualitative research, our sampling strategy means that our findings are not generalizable. Nonetheless, we hope that future efforts by scholars will examine the influence of race and protester type on perceptions and support of defund the police among a larger number of protesters.

4.1 | Policy recommendations

It is important to reflect on how the public develop perceptions and meaning of defund the police, the role of mass media, and what steps social movement organizations like BLM can take to promote their goals and slogans effectively. The mass media has a significant impact on the public's understanding of defund the police. In addition, the ways in which these issues are framed are frequently tied to political leanings of the outlet. Media coverage of the BLM movement is frequently framed as a threat to public interests, which is highly racialized even in outlets that are politically neutral (Reid & Craig, 2021), thereby removing any nuance or complexity from these definitions (Sandelind, 2014). Activists and organizations working on social justice issues can use our results to develop strategies and promote their slogans and messages for different audiences. Despite attempts by some to inculcate a sense of fear in the populace around defunding police (Manchester & Brufke, 2020), our findings suggest that most people actively involved in protests see the term as more aligned with reduction and reallocation of funds currently allocated to police—a far cry from abolition. We recommend social movement organizations partner with

communication brands and advertising agencies to develop marketing strategies for maximum outreach of their goals.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors confirm that they have no conflict of interest to declare.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The Ferguson protests in August 2014 following Michael Brown's death and Baltimore protests in April 2015 following Freddie Gray's death were precursors to the 2020 summer protests.
- ² While defund the police gained notoriety during protests after Floyd's death, discussions about abolishing police in the United States are more than a century old and build on the work of respected scholars and activists, such as W.E.B. DuBois, Bertrand Russell, and Angela Davis.
- ³ Even cities with higher percentages of democratic voters shifted toward increased funding for police in 2021, including Phoenix, San Diego, Atlanta, and Sacramento (Akinnibi et al., 2021).
- ⁴ For example, the Monmouth poll (Murray, 2020) provided respondents with two options: does defund the police mean getting rid of police completely or changing the way they operate? But what respondents might perceive as "change" was not defined.
- ⁵ During the Civil Rights Era, for example, leaders of social movements took action to entice the news media to broadcast their concerns by scheduling protests for the morning so footage would be ready for the evening news (Wasow, 2020).
- ⁶ For the purpose of our study, we will refer to defund the police as a slogan, term, and frame interchangeably.
- ⁷ The March on Washington was organized by the National Action Network and the purpose was to get people to commit to a day of action to demonstrate one's commitment to fight for police and criminal justice reform.
- ⁸ The March on Washington took place on August 28, 2020 and interviews began mid-September 2020.
- ⁹ Pseudonyms are used throughout the study.
- ¹⁰ The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers placed a flier, along with other information, during the grab-n-go with a "not endorsed by American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers" sign. Those interested were given the opportunity to grab it and participate in the study at will.
- ¹¹ The march ended at the Martin Luther King Jr. memorial. The first author stood at the entrance and distributed the flier to those entering the memorial.
- ¹² The interview team included one Black woman professor, one South Asian woman professor, one Black male master's student, one Black female undergraduate student, one Latina doctoral student, and two White female doctoral students. The team received extensive training on qualitative interviewing prior to data collection.
- ¹³ Interviewers asked participants questions from the survey and filled out their response.
- ¹⁴ This term does not imply that these protesters are not serious or are participating in protests for their own enjoyment. The term illustrates people who have participated in a small number of protests and expressed less commitment than intermittent and revolutionary protesters.
- ¹⁵ Those who never protested before the March on Washington were categorized as new protesters regardless of commitment level.
- ¹⁶ Participants reported that their residences were in the following states: Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas. Only three participants resided 40 miles from Washington, DC where protests took place. Two were revolutionary protesters and one was a tourist. The two revolutionary protesters supported police abolition.
- ¹⁷ All four reported their political orientation as radical left.
- ¹⁸ As it relates to political orientation, 10 identified as radical left, four left, and six moderates.
- ¹⁹ Two reported having a moderate political orientation, and one identified as left leaning.

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APPENDIX A

Study participants (N = 28)

Name	Age	Gender	Race	Location	Protester type
Hillary	54	Female	Black	Chicago, IL	New
Alexus	58	Female	Black	Atlanta, GA	New
Maya	31	Female	Black	Redford, MI	New
Charlotte	74	Female	Black	Atlanta, GA	New
Holly	33	Female	White	Fairhaven, MA	Intermittent
Lucia	45	Female	Hispanic	Houston, TX	New
Ruby	55	Female	Black	Chicago, IL	Intermittent
Katherine	29	Female	White	Orlando, FL	Intermittent
Carol	42	Female	White	Colorado Springs, CO	Revolutionary
Natalie	32	Female	White	Fayetteville, AR	New
Michelle	48	Female	Black	Raleigh, NC	Tourist
Kalinda	35	Female	Black	Dallas, TX	Tourist
Maddy	66	Female	White	Salisbury, MD	New
Lyn	26	Female	Black and White	Indianapolis, IN	Revolutionary
Emily	50	Female	White	Millwood, NY	New
Bethanie	53	Female	Black	Detroit, MI	Intermittent
Amber	32	Female	Black	Meadville, PA	Tourist
Lisa	50	Female	Black	Columbus, OH	Tourist
Jada	23	Female	Black and White	Ferndale, MI	Tourist
Kiarra	38	Transgender female	Black and Latinx	Hackensack, NJ	Tourist
Kenny	35	Male	White	Meadville, PA	Tourist
Aniyah	42	Female	Black	Irving, TX	Revolutionary
Willie	55	Male	Black	Chicago, IL	New
Raven	23	Transgender female	Black and White	Brooklyn, NY	Intermittent
Jenna	24	Female	White	Dayton, OH	Revolutionary
Camille	24	Female	White	Baltimore, MD	Revolutionary
Taylor	25	Female	White	Greenbelt, MD	Tourist
Jaylin	24	Nonbinary	Black	Baltimore, MD	Revolutionary