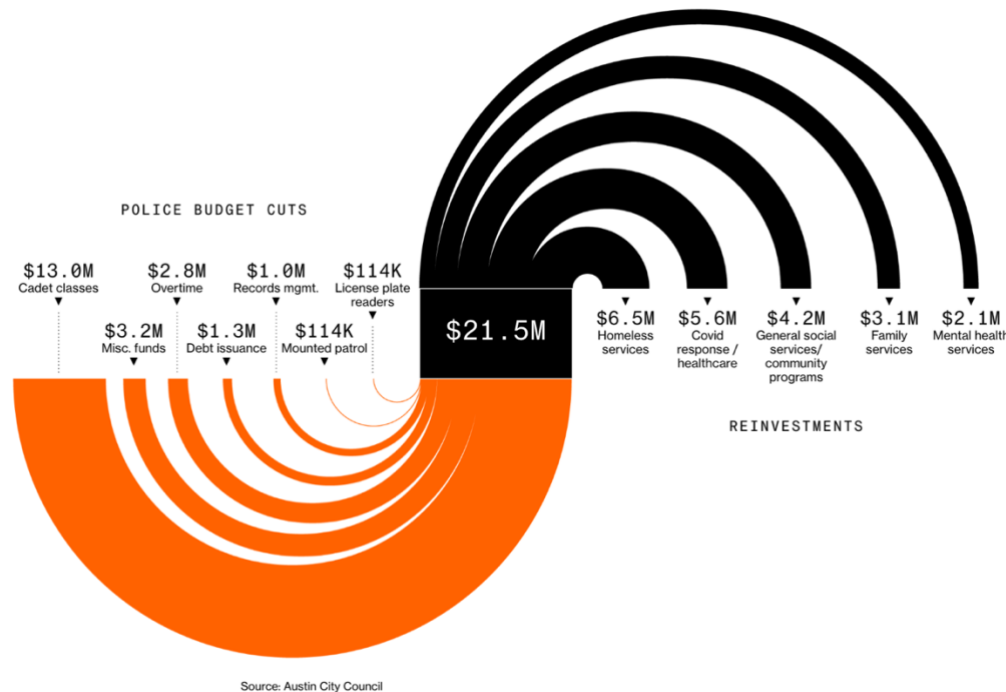


Lessons from Austin, Los Angeles County, and Oregon

Does Minnesota's experience – a state at the epicenter of mass protests against police brutality that nevertheless takes only a few tentative steps towards reimagining public safety through budgets – suggest that bolder, more dramatic changes aren't possible in the near term? Not at all. Organizers, advocates, and local officials across the country have been pushing to reinvest public safety budgets, pursuing a vision for public safety in which all residents are safe. Many of these efforts gained momentum in 2020, while others have existed long before then. They have made remarkable progress – and their experiences offer a number of lessons for the movement to build better systems of public safety in Minnesota. Austin, Texas; Los Angeles County, California; and Oregon each provide glimpses of what changes are possible.

Divestment and investment in Austin, Texas

Unbundling of police services & tangible re-investment in alternatives



Austin, Texas has made headlines for being one of the few cities in the United States to make sizable cuts to its police budget in the wake of mass protests in 2020. A [CityLab analysis of 34 major cities](#) in September 2020 revealed that Austin made the largest percentage cut to its police budget (34%) and one of the largest aggregate cuts (\$150 million) of any city. Though a closer inspection raises questions about how transformative these changes will be for the city's public safety systems, Austin nevertheless offers a compelling example of how cities in Minnesota might reimagine their public safety investments in the near term.

The killing of George Floyd, combined with the Austin Police Department's killing of unarmed Black and Hispanic resident Mike Ramos the month before, sparked mass protests in Austin. Trust in the Austin Police Department continued to erode after their aggressive response to

protests seriously injured at least 41 people, including teenager Brad Ayala; in June, the mayor and all ten City Council members [pledged to not accept political donations](#) from the city's police union. As city leaders considered the city's 2021 budget, hundreds of Austin residents offered testimony about their experiences with police brutality and urged that funding be redirected to other strategies to achieve public safety, led by local organizations like the Austin Justice Coalition and Communities of Color United.

In August, the City Council [voted unanimously](#) to cut the Austin Police Department's budget by \$150 million within the next year, which would represent a 34% decrease to the department's \$434 million budget. This marks a striking reversal from recent years: Austin's police budget increased each year since 2009, and has grown by 50% since 2013.⁵⁶

There are three broad categories of [redirected public safety funds](#) in Austin. The first is an immediate cut of approximately \$20 million, primarily through the elimination of three future police cadet classes, to be reinvested in services to respond to COVID-19, homelessness, mental health, and more. (The graphic above, produced by the Austin City Council, offers a detailed look at how this funding was cut and reinvested). An additional \$80 million will be removed from the Austin Police Department over the course of 2021 as part of an effort to "[unbundle](#)" services that were deemed to not be essential police responsibilities, including forensics, the 911 call center, and victim services. Another \$50 million was pledged to be removed from the police budget and reinvested in "alternative forms of public safety and community support," as identified by a [year-long reimagining process](#).

This budget faced criticism for not going far enough and for going too far. Advocates in Austin pointed out that the immediate \$20 million budget reallocation represented just 5% of the police department's budget, and called for actions that go beyond restructuring existing services. One resident noted that "reimagining public safety does not simply mean reorganizing departments." One of the organizations at the forefront of police divestment/investment strategies, Communities of Color United, [is pushing for a \\$220 million cut](#) to the APD – which would be approximately 50% of the department's budget – and reinvestment in public health, low-income housing, and the city's racial equity office. Meanwhile, Texas' conservative governor Greg Abbott [threatened cut state revenues](#) for cities like Austin that defunded their police departments. While Abbott hasn't yet used state authority to punish Austin for its budget decision, doing so would constitute yet another example of Abbott's inclination to [preempt local policy decisions he disagrees with](#).

What this means for Minnesota

Austin's example offers at least three potential lessons for Minnesota's cities.

- First, **Austin provides a benchmark for how much of a police department's budget might be redirected to alternative strategies in the short term.** Setting aside the \$80 million of funding for services that Austin unbundled from the police department but kept largely intact, the Austin City Council's decision to redirect around \$70 million from its

⁵⁶ Reigstad, Leif. "How Austin Cut One Third of Its Spending on the Police Department." Texas Monthly, November 17, 2020. <https://www.texasmonthly.com/politics/austin-police-department-defunding/>.

police department constitutes a 16% reduction. An equivalent 16% reduction for Minneapolis' police budget would enable the city to invest an additional \$30 million in alternative strategies to support public safety. Austin-sized reductions would correspond to around \$17 million in Saint Paul, \$4.4 million in Rochester, \$3.8 million in Duluth, and nearly \$2 million in Edina. These sums may not meet [MinnesotaH activists' goals for reinvestment](#), and clearly cannot fix underlying wealth inequities in cities, yet they are not trivial sums. With these funds, Minneapolis could support 24/7 mobile mental health teams, street outreach teams to prevent violence, and invest millions in affordable housing.⁵⁷ Saint Paul would be able to extend its "[People's Prosperity](#)" guaranteed income pilot, currently serving 150 low-income families in the city, to nearly 3,000 new families. Edina would be able to double its [community development budget](#).

- Second, Austin's example suggests that **unbundling services currently overseen by police departments may be a useful tactic to restore trust and reduce undue departmental influence** without eliminating essential services. While some residents are rightly skeptical that moving the city's 911 Call Center outside of the police department will change anything, it's also possible that such a move will enable call center leadership to adopt a broader definition of success and coordinate more effectively across departments.
- Finally, **Austin's 2021 budget helps to expand definitions of what public safety means**. By explicitly linking cuts to the police department with investments in homelessness prevention, COVID-19 emergency response, and mental health services, the Austin City Council affirms that these services, too, constitute part of the city's systems to provide public safety. Minnesota's cities could take a similarly broad-minded view; it may be easier to justify investments in social services when they are seen as essential pillars of a municipal public safety strategy.

It's worth noting that cities that divert Austin-level amounts from police budgets aren't dooming their police departments to failure. A 16% cut would result in Minneapolis investing about the same amount per resident in policing as Saint Paul currently does. Saint Paul cutting its police budget by 16% would result in per-capita investments in policing on par with the suburban city of Bloomington. Edina's reduced police budget would still surpass the per-capita police spending of neighboring suburbs like Minnetonka and Plymouth.⁵⁸ Austin's 2021 budget is a signal to cities across Minnesota, and across the United States, that new approaches to investing in public safety are possible.

⁵⁷ The "People's Budget" published by Black Visions Collective estimates that mobile mental health teams would cost \$4.5 million annually; street outreach teams at least \$6.5 million; and calls for \$10 million annually for affordable housing.

⁵⁸ Author's calculations based on 2018 State Auditor data. With a 16% cut, Minneapolis' per-capita police spending would fall from \$412 per resident to \$345, still greater than any other city in Minnesota. Saint Paul's per-capita spending would fall from \$343 to \$287; Edina's would fall from \$233 to \$196, still surpassing per-capita investments by nearby suburban communities like Plymouth (\$184) and Minnetonka (\$183).

Los Angeles County's "Measure J" initiative

How a ballot measure centered on community reinvestment won big



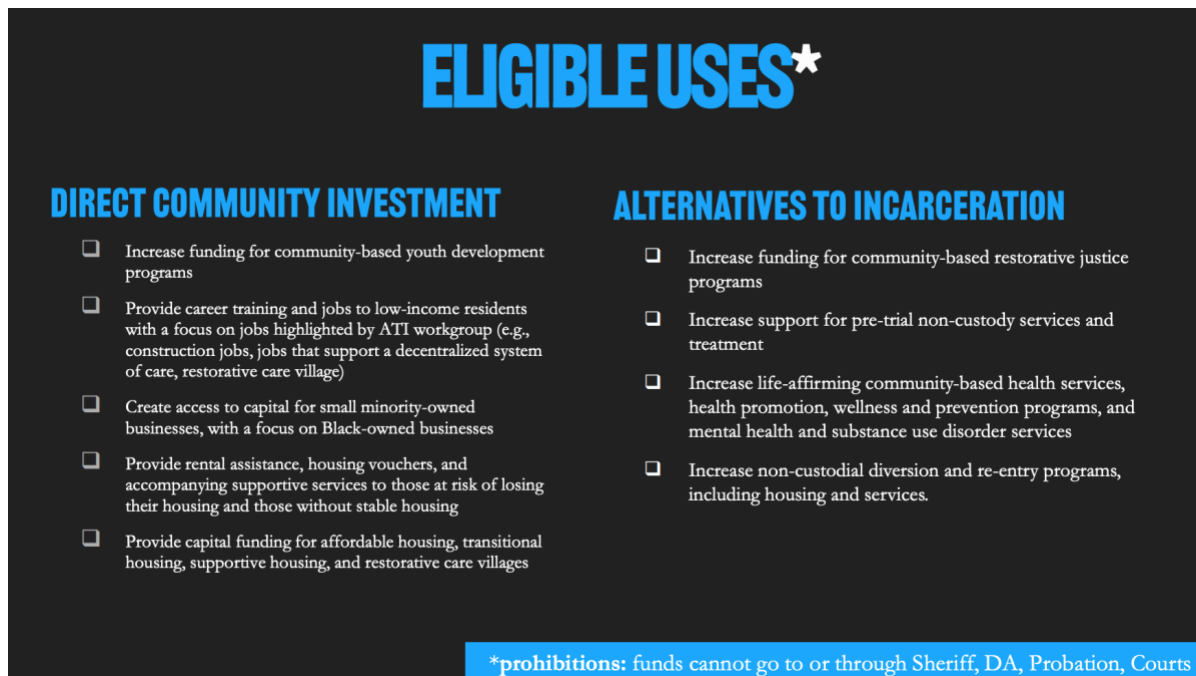
Los Angeles has been home to several dramatic public safety budget shifts in recent months. After initially proposing a budget increase for the LAPD in 2020, Los Angeles Mayor Garcetti [supported his city council's proposal](#) to cut \$150 million from the LAPD's \$1.86 billion budget in the wake of George Floyd's killing. Around the same time, the Los Angeles Unified School District reduced its school police budget by a third, from \$70 million to \$45 million, laying off 65 officers. But it's Los Angeles County that may be implementing the most novel, and most promising, experiment in public safety investment in the region.

This summer, [a coalition of nearly 100 local racial and criminal justice organizations](#) in Los Angeles County successfully pushed the county's Board of Supervisors to put a question about public investment on the 2020 ballot. Measure J, known as "Reimagine LA County," would require the county to spend 10 percent of its unrestricted general funds – somewhere between \$360 million and \$900 million annually – on social services and alternatives to policing. Promotional materials shared by the Reimagine L.A. Coalition connected Measure J to the Movement for Black Lives and mass protests against racial injustice, yet didn't mention budget cuts to police or corrections. Instead, it sought to rally voters around proactive investments in community needs, including community-based restorative justice programs, mental health services, housing vouchers, and more. Voters approved the measure overwhelmingly, with 57% in support. This measure will be implemented starting next year; with no sunset clause, it will channel hundreds of millions of dollars to social service programs that offer alternatives to incarceration for many years to come.

What this means for Minnesota

Los Angeles County's Measure J offers several lessons for ongoing efforts to reimagine public safety budgets across Minnesota.

- First, **Measure J provides one example for how efforts to reimagine public safety budgets can center counties.** As explored earlier in this report, counties play enormously important roles not just in funding traditional public safety services like policing and corrections, but also in funding public health, human services, and other components of this country's safety net. The advocates for Measure J devised a way to redirect county investments towards community needs for the foreseeable future.
- Second, **Measure J suggests the power of putting questions of public budgeting to voters directly.** Rather than pressing the county board of supervisors to make changes through the county's annual budget process, advocates for this ballot measure identified a simple, accessible question and asked voters to decide it. This legally binding decision may well endure for longer than a proposal brokered by the board of supervisors would have. In passing, Measure J joins a long tradition of voters in cities, counties, and states approving progressive legislation that has been stymied by other political processes, including investments in affordable housing and public transit, minimum wage increases, and marijuana legalization. Minnesota's state laws place more restrictions on the use of ballot referenda than California's do, and other obstacles to this approach exist - as evidenced by the Minneapolis charter commission blocking the City Council's proposal to place question of police staffing on the 2020 ballot – yet the approach of appealing to voters directly still holds great promise.
- Third, **Measure J provides one model for how reimagined public safety budgets could be structured.** The measure sets a clear investment baseline – 10% of the county's unrestricted general funds – and identifies two broad categories to invest in: “direct community investment” and “alternatives to incarceration.” Reflecting widespread belief among activists that sheriff, police, and correctional agencies should not be the ones to lead community investments, Measure J also clarifies that these investments cannot be directed through traditional public safety agencies. The following graphic, produced by the Coalition to Reimagine L.A. County, offers greater detail into the measure's structure for investments.



Graphic produced by the Coalition to Reimagine L.A. County, 2020

This structure already mirrors how some Minnesota-based activists are thinking about reimagining public budgets: “direct community investment” seems roughly equivalent to MPD150’s Ricardo Levins Morales’ articulation of “horizontal investments,” while “alternatives to incarceration” equates to “vertical investments.”⁵⁹ Differentiating between investments in community needs and investments in public safety alternatives, and underscoring why both are necessary, can continue to be a powerful organizing structure in Minnesota.

- Finally, **Los Angeles County’s Measure J illustrates the possibilities of political strategies that center a positive vision of community investment.** One of the persistent findings across recent public polling on issues of policing and criminal justice is that calls to redirect funding from police and prisons enjoy much higher levels of support than calls to “defund” or “abolish” policing across all racial and ethnic groups.⁶⁰ Though public opinion shouldn’t be the only criteria for defining policy strategies to address public safety concerns, the success of Measure J at a time when ideas of “defunding the police” have attracted sharp criticism from many state and federal officials suggests that framing questions of public safety in ways that are sensitive to public perception can provide a path forward.

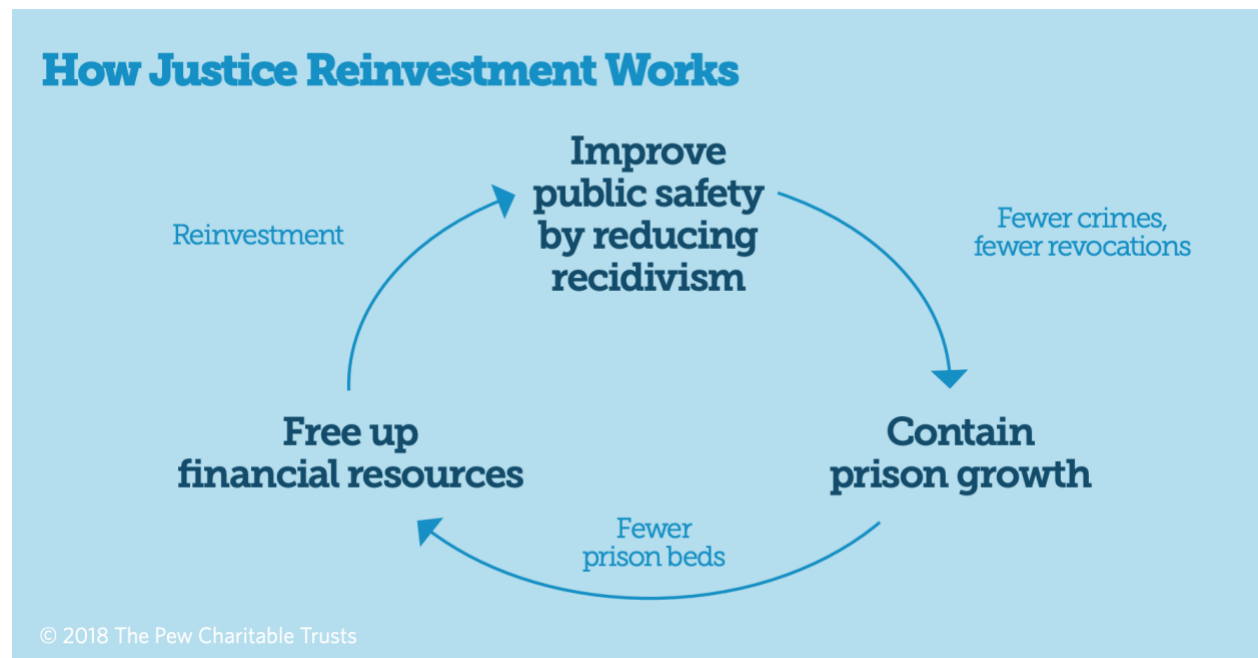
⁵⁹ In Morales’ telling, “horizontal” investments improve community-wide health, while “vertical investments” fund targeted interventions to specific problems. See my interview with Morales for additional context.

⁶⁰ City University of New York Professor Michael Javen Fortner offers a comprehensive summary of Black Americans’ attitudes towards policing, public safety investment, and police defunding. See: Fortner, “Reconstructing Justice,” *Niskanen Center*.

Measure J may have been one of the first successful ballot measures to explicitly connect themes from the 2020 protests to reimagined public safety budgets, yet given its success, it will hopefully not be the last.

Oregon's Justice Reinvestment Grant Program

Redirecting criminal justice savings towards community-based investments across a state



Guiding philosophy of the Justice Reinvestment Initiative, a U.S. Department of Justice-led partnership with state governments, The Pew Charitable Trusts, and other organizations

Oregon, one of the 36 states that participate in the US Department of Justice-led Justice Reinvestment Initiative, offers a model for how the state of Minnesota can shift criminal justice resources towards effective public safety strategies.

Oregon implemented reforms through the Justice Reinvestment Initiative in 2013 in an effort to curb the rapid growth of its prison population and associated expenses. Between 2000 and 2012, Oregon's prison population grew by 50%, and continued growth was projected to cost the state [an additional \\$600 million by 2022](#). The state passed laws to reduce prison-related expenses, including by shortening probation periods and increasing judicial discretion when sentencing less serious crimes, and proposed to invest the cost savings in housing and reentry services, employment and education services, and behavioral health treatment.

Oregon is unique across all states in the Justice Reinvestment Initiative for reinvesting in partnership with its 36 counties. The state's Justice Reinvestment Grant Program offers each county a minimum of \$100,000 annually to invest in proven safety strategies, and provides millions of dollars more to counties through a competitive grant process. This structure

incentivizes county governments to think creatively about how to provide services that meet their particular needs.

The state estimates that its Justice Reinvestment Program reforms have saved [more than \\$350 million](#) in avoided costs since 2013, including by delaying the need to construct two new prisons. The Justice Reinvestment Grant Program has distributed [approximately \\$98 million](#) in criminal justice savings to counties across the state. This includes more than [\\$18 million in community-based services](#) and \$11 million towards compensating victims of criminal justice procedures. That said, not all funds have been reinvested in alternatives to traditional public safety systems: the grant program has also funded parole officers, local corrections agencies, and law enforcement.⁶¹

What this means for Minnesota

Oregon's experience with the Justice Reinvestment Grant Program offers several potential lessons for Minnesota.

- **First, the Justice Reinvestment Grant Program provides an example of how states can play important roles in channeling cost reductions from traditional systems of public safety towards better alternatives.** This program, and the Justice Reinvestment Initiative, serves as a reminder that calls to redirect funds from wasteful, harmful public safety interventions to more effective ones are not new. In fact, these policies have been implemented across all levels of government. Minnesota is one of 14 states that do not participate in the Justice Reinvestment Initiative, and state leaders may want to consider the benefits that this national network can offer as they seek to make the most of their public safety investments.
- **Second, Oregon's Justice Reinvestment Grant Program offers a model for what a durable and smart state-local partnership looks like.** By providing counties with a baseline funding amount each year, the program ensures that all counties across the state benefit from cost savings; and by offering grants to counties on a competitive basis, the state can catalyze local innovation and problem-solving that are responsive to each county's specific needs.
- **Finally, state leaders in Minnesota could explore how to refine, extend, and adapt the approach of Oregon's Justice Reinvestment Grant Program to meet the state's public safety needs.** The grant program focuses on curbing costs associated with state prisons; what if state leaders in Minnesota led efforts to reduce unnecessary policing expenses as well? Could state leaders incentivize cities and counties to redirect policing and corrections spending to community-based alternatives? What if state leaders provided funding for public engagement processes in counties, cities, or neighborhoods to ensure that redirected funds went towards local priorities? As Minnesota Justice Research Center Executive Director Justin Terrell mentioned to me, the state government of Minnesota

⁶¹ For a detailed breakdown of Oregon's and other states' reinvestments in the Justice Reinvestment Initiative, see: Welsh-Loveman and Harvell, "Justice Reinvestment Initiative Data Snapshot," *Urban Institute*.

holds tremendous power to shape public safety budgets through legislation, technical assistance, and their own funding. State leaders can get creative to find ways to direct state and local public safety budgets towards strategies that keep everyone safe.

The examples of Austin, Los Angeles County, and Oregon affirm that there are indeed ways to reimagine the use of public safety budgets across every level of government in today's political climate. These jurisdictions are beginning to answer some of the questions that surfaced in my interviews.

Council Member Fletcher asks: "How can we move emergency response for non-violent situations out of the hands of law enforcement?" By "unbundling" municipal services from its police department, such as the 911 call center, Austin is beginning an experiment to de-center law enforcement within its emergency response.

Ricardo Levins Morales asks: "What investments align with the principle "nobody gets seconds until everyone has had firsts"? By requiring that Los Angeles County spend at least ten percent of its budget on community investments and alternatives to incarceration, the "Reimagine L.A. County" measure ensures that these essential services are well-funded before resources are allocated to sheriffs and corrections.

Chanda Smith Baker and Justin Terrell ask: "What problems can't be solved solely by redirecting public funds?" Oregon's Justice Reinvestment Initiative exemplifies an approach that combines policy changes – in Oregon's case, sentencing reforms that reduce the state's prison population – with new investments to achieve more just public safety outcomes.

These are just a few of the countless efforts undertaken by in cities, counties, states, school districts, and other jurisdictions to rethink their existing budgets in response to the crises we face today. To paraphrase Louis Brandeis' famous observation, these communities serve as laboratories for democracy, and their successes – and failures – can serve as a guide for the future of public safety in this country.