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Rethinking Police and Public Safety Budgeting

Seven new rules for police budgeting that differ from the traditional budget process

By Shayne Kavanagh and Jennifer Park | Apr 01, 2021 | PM MAGAZINE - ARTICLE



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Local governments need to rethink police budgeting. Calls to “defund the police” have gotten a lot of attention in the news and social media. However, surveys show that although there is widespread agreement that local governments need to take a fresh look at how policing is conducted, there is not widespread agreement that reducing police funding is necessarily the way forward. Nor is there any clear agreement on what the best way forward is.¹

This means local governments will need a way to reach good decisions about police budgeting. However, the traditional local government budgeting system (i.e., take last year’s budget and make changes around the margins) is not up to the task for several reasons. One of the most important is that the traditional approach is based on historical precedent. It tends to freeze past practices in place. It does not provide a way to thoughtfully reexamine what is working well and what isn’t and then make changes accordingly.

A budget process must be guided by rules for how decisions will be made and how those decisions will translate into action. The purpose of this article is to explore seven new rules for police budgeting that differ

conversation with their budget officer about how the budget process can be redesigned to better suit the questions that local governments now face. These rules come from a report produced by the Government Finance Officers Association and Results for America, "[Time for Change: A Practical Approach to Rethinking Police Budgeting](#)." This report also discusses other aspects of making good decisions on police budgeting, such as engaging the public, building trust between participants in the budgeting process, and formulating a long-term vision and goals for police and public safety.

Rule #1: Historical precedent should not determine future spending. Instead, focus on how to cost-effectively achieve community goals.

Traditionally, last year's budget is the basis for next year's budget. Over the years, patterns of spending build up and may no longer be relevant to the community's needs or may no longer be affordable. The new rule is to direct spending to programs that achieve the community's public safety goals at an affordable cost.

It will be easier to follow this rule if there is a long-term vision and plan for public safety. The long-term vision defines the public safety goals. The budget directs money to activities that achieve these goals. New approaches to public safety will take time to plan and implement. Making the connection between a long-term vision and the budget allows for deliberate and steady progress.

Conversation Starter: Is your government willing to give up historical precedent as the primary determinant of future spending? Are you willing and able to direct spending to programs that best achieve the community's public safety goals at an affordable cost?

Rule #2: Departments and divisions are not the best decision unit for budgeting. Instead, more granularity is needed.

Bureaucratic units, like departments or divisions, are useful for day-to-day management, but have limitations as the unit of analysis for budgeting. One limitation is that they are too large and encompass too many activities to make thoughtful decisions about how to reallocate resources.

The new rule is to disaggregate spending and use granular decision units for budgeting. Many cities have done this with program budgeting. Figure 1 provides a list of common programs in police departments across 80 U.S. cities, ranging in size from 11,000 people to 727,000 people (average 108,000). The table shows the typical portion of the police budget taken up by the largest programs.² A program inventory is a foundation for budgeting methods, like priority-driven budgeting,³ that invites stakeholders to consider which programs will best achieve the community's vision

Figure 1. Average Portion of Budget Taken by Larger Programs in Police Budgets in 80 U.S. Cities

39.7%	Patrol
11.3%	Investigations
10.6%	Administration
9.4%	Dispatch
6.1%	Community-oriented policing, outreach
2.4%	Drugs, narcotics
2.0%	Special weapons (SWAT)
2.0%	Evidence, crime lab
1.9%	Training
1.8%	Records
1.8%	School resource officers
0.9%	Internal affairs
0.9%	Canine unit
90.8%	Total

Note that jails are excluded because many cities do not operate their own jails. The remaining budget is composed of smaller programs such as hazardous material response, bomb squads, canine units, etc.

Some programs may need to be disaggregated further. For instance, in Figure 1, we see that “patrol” is almost 40 percent of a police department’s budget. Understanding how patrol officers spend their time and the results they produce is critical to figuring out how to better use police resources. Unfortunately, there is not yet a common method for further disaggregating general police patrol into discrete units for budgeting. That does not mean progress can’t be made, though. The city of Phoenix, for example, commissioned a detailed study of police operations several years ago and used the results to guide subsequent budget decisions. Although the city has not disaggregated the police patrol program, it does have enough information about how police use their time to make better decisions on how to allocate resources.

***Conversation Starter:** Are you willing/able to disaggregate spending beyond departments and divisions and identify more meaningful units of analysis than objects of expenditure (salaries, benefits, etc.)? Can you disaggregate enough to make meaningful decisions on how and where to allocate scarce resources between competing ideas for how to reach public safety goals? How can you get a better idea of how resources are used in the patrol function?*

Rule #3: Think outside of department silos and look for multidisciplinary solutions.

Another limitation of using bureaucratic units for budgeting is that it tends to reinforce thinking about local government in terms of units. For example, “public safety” becomes synonymous with “police.” Traditional policing plays an important role in public safety, but not the only role. Police officers are underprepared to respond to social problems, such as mental illness, homelessness, and even civil unrest.

The new rule for budgeting is to use the budget as a forum to bring other perspectives to the issues that make up public safety. In the traditional budget process, departments make their budget decisions in isolation from one another, and therefore, view problems through the lens of their functional specialization. A cross-departmental team can help people better appreciate what each department does and see the need for looking beyond departmental boundaries when considering the budget.

Cross-functional teams are not just useful for saving money, but also for build stronger working relationships to address multifaceted problems. For example, in a mid-sized city, the police chief began “neighborhood walks,” where representatives from police, code enforcement, planning, recreation, and others would walk through neighborhoods with community leaders. Together, they would identify the problems most important to the neighborhood, develop a response plan, and then report back to the neighborhood. This cross-departmental approach not only demonstrates a collective response to problem-solving, but also incorporates the community, ultimately building or rebuilding trust with residents.

Conversation Starter: How will you break out of department silos? Is there a role for cross-functional teams in making decisions?

Rule #4: Give prevention a chance.

Local government budgets often prioritize remedial services over preventative services. However, preventative approaches have proven more cost-effective and more humane. The new rule is to give preventative services a chance.

For example, homeless individuals are often arrested or issued citations, despite the fact that it's not an effective response to homelessness. The value of preventative services is apparent for major crimes. The total financial cost to society of major crimes, such as property and violent crimes, can reach tens of thousands of dollars to millions. The human cost of these crimes is invaluable.

There are many ways to start to adopt a preventative budget. For example, the traditional budget often uses "workload" or "input" measures to describe the value created by public services, such as the number of calls responded to, the number of citations issued. To the extent that resource allocations are tied to these kinds of measures, remedial services will continue to get priority over preventative services. Alternatively, identifying measures that lead to better community outcomes might help local government leaders think about how to prevent the problems that make the community worse off.⁴

Conversation Starter: How can you give preventative strategies a fair chance to succeed in the budget process?

Rule #5: Identify what works.

Funding what works may seem simple; however, when allocating resources to "public safety," local governments continue to fund programs that do not achieve desired goals and outcomes. Incorporating data and evidence into the budget process can help local government identify what is working well and what isn't, ultimately helping leaders make funding allocations accordingly. Local governments can start by asking departments to identify how the funding they request achieves the public safety vision and goals, and then require data analysis and/or evaluation results to show evidence of progress towards these goals.

When data analysis and evaluation results are integrated into the budget process, senior leaders are equipped with the information they need to ask the right questions as they make decisions about funding allocation. Data is also valuable in maintaining lines of communication and engagement with the community on why some programs are funded and others are not.

Conversation Starter: How does your budget process consider evidence of what programs work?

Rule #6: Look for smart, strategic ways to save money.

Saving money in the public safety budget is important for two reasons: First, many local governments have less money to spend now, period. Second, many public safety reforms require spending *more* money. The money can come from reallocating funds from things local government can stop doing or start doing differently.

The traditional maneuvers for saving money include across-the-board cuts to services or cutting “nonessential” line items, like training. However, both strategies are arbitrary and “dumb down” all services, regardless of their value. For example, reducing training could result in officers committing more mistakes, leading to litigation, and, ultimately, increasing costs. The new rule is to look for smart, strategic ways to save money.

The other rules we outlined set a government up to find smarter ways to save money. You can see many of the rules reflected in these examples of money-saving opportunities.

Centralize support services: Efficiencies could be realized by centralizing maintenance of vehicles, information technology, or other support services that police run separately from the rest of government.

Wider use of non-sworn staff: Sworn officers may perform tasks that could be performed by lower-cost, non-sworn staff, like parking enforcement.

Share services with overlapping or contiguous agencies: Services like animal control, city jails, and warrant delivery have the potential to be shared with other agencies, like a county sheriff.

Prevent rather than remediate: Prevention is often cheaper. For example, cycling homeless people through the justice system is more expensive than helping them get housed.⁵ The financial impact on society of major property and violent crimes is substantial.⁶

Divest of low-value services: The classic example of this is the mounted police.⁷ A more contemporary example might be school resource officers. Research suggests that school resource officers are often not effective for many of the roles they are asked to take on and can have detrimental effects on students.⁸

Review special units: For decades, the common response to a specific public safety problem (prostitution, crack cocaine, opioids, gangs, gun violence, and others) has been to create a special unit. Departments may find that they have as many as a dozen special units. These units may be inefficient because they fragment the response to multifaceted and complex problems. One police department was able to redirect resources to preventive patrol and community policing by combining multiple special units and cross-training officers.

Remove the barriers to doing the right thing: Departments in municipal governments, not just police, have been known to do things like spend out remaining budgets at the end of the year or pad the budgets. These “budget games” are often rational responses to the rules of budgeting. A change in the rules can change the incentives to engage in these kinds of behaviors for all departments, including law enforcement.⁹

Conversation Starter: Which of the opportunities mentioned have potential for your government? Are there other ideas you can think of?

Rule #7: Don't budget "either/or," "budget both/and."

Oftentimes, a budget is framed as a competition between two competing views and only one can win. In one police department, there was a division of opinion between focusing on law enforcement versus community engagement. Fortunately, this department realized that it didn't have to choose; it could find a way to do both.¹⁰ Hence, the new rule is to evaluate spending decisions in a way that encourages a balanced portfolio of public safety services. A balanced portfolio will usually be the best way to meet the local government's goals in a cost-effective manner.

Conversation Starter: Does your budget process fund a portfolio of approaches for reaching public safety goals rather than putting all your eggs in one basket?

Conclusion

The seven rules for budgeting we described here can guide a local government budgeting process that:

- Achieves cost-effective reform of public safety.
- Prudently uses limited resources.
- Gives all stakeholders (the public, police, etc.) a voice in the process, especially when connected to the other pillars of financial foundations.

We are in an unprecedented moment of financial distress that calls for serious and important reforms to the largest area of municipal spending. There are no "ready-made" budgeting methods that incorporate all seven rules. However, city managers and their budget officers can borrow techniques from budgeting methods like priority-driven budgeting¹¹ and zero-base budgeting¹² to design a process that uses the seven rules to get their local government to where it needs to go.



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benchmark their progress and develop a roadmap for using data to drive effective change and deliver results for residents.

Endnotes and Resources

¹ Shayne Kavanagh, Clarence Wardell III, Ph.D., and Jennifer Park, “Time for Change: A Practical Approach to Rethinking Police Budgeting,” Government Finance Officers Association and Results for America, December 2020.

² Data provided courtesy of Chris Fabian of ResourceX.

³ <https://www.gfoa.org/materials/anatomy-of-a-priority-driven-budget-process>

⁴ Dan Health, *Upstream: The Quest to Solve Problems Before They Happen*, Avid Reader Press, 2020.

⁵ Joe Hogsett, Barbara Poppe, and Mary Cunningham, “Housing Is How We End Homelessness, Not Police Sweeps,” Bloomberg City Lab, October 5, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com>

⁶ Paul Heaton, “Hidden in Plain Sight: What Cost-of-Crime Research Can Tell Us About Investing in Police,” Rand Corporation, 2010.

⁷ Linda Poon, “When Police Horses Become Targets for Budget Cuts,” Bloomberg CityLab, June 29, 2020.

⁸ Alexis Stern and Anthony Petrosino, “What Do We Know About the Effects of School-Based Law Enforcement on School Safety?” WestEd Justice and Prevention Research Center, 2018.

⁹ For examples of how this has been applied in law enforcement, see the section on “Removing Barriers to Doing the Right Thing” in Chapter 12 of *Financial Foundations for Thriving Communities* by Shayne Kavanagh and Vincent Reitano, published by the Government Finance Officers Association.

¹⁰ <http://theilluminationproject.org/our-approaches/>

¹¹ <https://www.gfoa.org/materials/anatomy-of-a-priority-driven-budget-process>

¹² <https://www.gfoa.org/materials/zero-base-budgeting>