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**Intro:** Welcome to the Let’s Talk Government Podcast that is provided for you by the Department of Government at Minnesota State University, Mankato located in Minnesota in the United States. I am your host Dr. Pat Nelson the chairperson of the Government Department. I want to thank you for joining us as we explore different topics about government. Some may be surprising to you and some may not, so please enjoy.

**Dr. Nelson:** Welcome to episode one of Let's Talk Government Podcast. Today we're going to talk about the current and controversial topics of defund the police, abolish the police, and policing today. I am joined by three faculty members from the Minnesota State University Mankato law enforcement program and more importantly all three faculty members have a variety of professional experience as long Forsman officers. Associate professor doctor Carl Lafata has been a member of the program for six years and has professional experience with the Michigan State Police and local agencies in California. Assistant professor doctor Thor Dolly has been a member of the program for five years and has professional experience with the Fargo Police Department in North Dakota and also with a local agency in Washington state. Assistant professor doctor John Reid is in his second year with the program and has professional experience with the Louisville Metro police and other agencies in Kentucky. Thank you for joining me today so let's start. Who wants to get started, what is the fun the police mean and why is it something we should consider?

**Dr. Thor Dahle:** I think it's mostly misunderstood topic. There are two different issues: abolish the police or defined the police. Defunding typically means removing funding from the police and redirecting those funds someplace else typically towards social or educational programs that are hopefully designed to divert people from the criminal justice system and solve the problem before the police are involved. Also, to take on responsibilities that have probably mistakenly been given to the police over the last several decades.

**John Reed:** I think Dr. Daly is right on point there. A lot of what the defunding is about is the actually divert a lot of the funding from the police to other entities such as those dealing with education, housing, poverty, and to push that money around to make it a more level playing field where abolishing the police is going to be something entirely different. I think that the groups that are actually advocating abolishment are the ones that are trying to do away with the police completely. While there's probably positives and negatives related to both of those different issues, I think there's a lot more negatives that are going to be involved with the actual abolishment of police.

**Dr. Nelson:** Doctor Lafata what do you think?

**Dr. Carl Lafata:** I think that the defund the police has been a political hot potato.

In the very far left of the political spectrum, it’s been used as a rallying cry to essentially drift into that abolishment. On the conservative side, it's been used to manipulate the fear of voters, a fear essentially of a lawless society. It is being used as a tool to manipulate. The reality of it is defunding is essentially as Dr. Dahle has stated, a removal of funding from law enforcement to agencies that are better suited to handle certain issues like nonviolent mental health response, calls involving nonviolence skeptics undergoing, some sort of mental health crisis, or substance abuse issues. Anything that doesn't involve a criminal aspect or something that involves the mental health aspect. Something that wouldn't fall under the purview of law enforcement. And, then taking again those funds from those law enforcement agencies and redirecting them to support those new organizations or preexisting organizations if they are already in service and removing the funds but at the same time removing those responsibilities. It falls in line not only with common sense, but also the idea that police officers want to get back to the business of doing law enforcement. if they wanted to do social work types of activities as their primary duty, then they would have become social workers.

**John Reed:** I think it's really if you look back through history, not recent history, anyway, a lot of these extra duties that have been given to the police really haven't been their choice. It’s a lot of these different things that come up because the police are 24/7 organization and they're always there. A lot of these duties have been passed off to the police that really aren't police duties. I'm not saying that helping the mentally ill is not one of the duties of police service, but there are certainly more people that have expertise in that area, and just to give you an example based on this covid that's out now one of the issues and I think most of us believe it to be a public health issue, but as some of these jurisdictions actually come out with different ordinances and laws pertaining to for example the wearing of mask, you get to the point that wants those laws are enacted, who's going to enforce the people wearing the mask. And I know in a lot of jurisdictions that's actually been passed off to the police because health organizations just don't have the personnel to deal with that. And we look at that as law enforcement and we say, hey is that really our job or is it really a duty that's best served by us conducting it.

**Carl Lafata:** I was going to say, if you look at, you know, an ordinance is passed it needs to be enforced, then law enforcement certainly isn’t appropriate executive branch organization. But conversely there are other things that that law enforcement is not expected to do. I know, Berkeley CA is looking at experimenting with having civilian non-sworn enforced traffic law and the problem with that is, you know, what if you find somebody with a warrant a suspended license that needs to go to jail, resists arrest, does something that requires a law enforcement response conversely, if you have somebody who, you know, the local community says, we shall enact this as an ordinance then it must follow the law enforcement because no other organization within that government is empowered to issue a citation, make arrest, whatever the penalty that is. So, by default once that statute or ordinance or whatever is put into place, it falls to law enforcement, much the same way as, you know, Jim Crow laws back in the day fell the law enforcement. Prior to that, you know, police officers are responsible for enforcing health and safety and food safety in the beginning in the late 1800s and so anything that is essentially codified into law or ordinance, must by its nature follow the law enforcement.

**Dr. Nelson:** I want to go back to something John said, that is actually a very good point. It’s many times law enforcement has done this to ourselves. We've made ourselves be available 24/7, right, we push the call 911 if you need anything. So, we have created a culture of if you need something, you need to call 911 and the police will come. But, as we look at that intersection, between always being available and then we have had changes in society where people are less connected with their neighbors and their family, and we have more people that need mental health or crisis intervention services. How can we look at defunding the police, and yet still provides the community the expectation that if somebody is in crisis 24 hours days, somebody will always be able to respond? What are your thoughts about that? Are we going to be able to call out a social worker at 2:00 AM or 3:00 AM if we have a nonviolent person that's involved in the crisis? And do we always know if their nonviolent? Thoughts?

**Carl Lafata:** First of all, that the whole idea of can we do it is already being done across the country in Eugene, Oregon, Denver, Colorado. There are programs that are designed to do just what you're talking about, and they've been in business in the Eugene, Oregon. Cahoots’ program has been around for many years and wildly successful, saves millions of dollars in the community every year and is basically served as an example for other organizations that are trying to form in other areas. And, so, it can be done. Whether or not you can predict somebody's going to be violent or nonviolent, that's a point for the people who are trained in those organizations, and they know when to call police and when not. The thing is, with law enforcement, you know, we have had this thrust upon us because of the defunding of the mental health system. It's never something we were intended to be. I mean, you've got, you know, people with years and years of training in psychology and social work and things of that nature that can do a much better job than someone who is trained over the course of the age or 10 or 15 or 22 weeks, to be a police officer and very very little of that training whether initially, or in service is spent in any sort of the escalation deal with mental health is there, but it's miniscule compared to what the subject matter experts in the field are able to do based on their training. And, so, as opposed to having jacks of all trades Masters of none, you know, the idea of defunding the police is essentially not defunding them and taking away their patrol cars in their paychecks, it's all about essentially redirecting resources from an agency, that was never intended nor is it trained to do this particular duty and giving it to an organization that certainly is and can do a much better job, and you know when to call the police.

**Dr. Thor Dahle:** And I think, doctor Lafata is right on point here with this. From the standpoint that when I was director of training for a while, and we saw more and more groups of what I'll say, or special interest groups. People dealing with those with autism or Alzheimer's or dementia or diabetes and the list just goes on and on, and they always wanted to come in and help take a week to train officers, and sooner or later as a law enforcement officials, you had to make a decision on what you were going to include in your curriculum because you could have had a school for training that went on two or three years, and you're looking at trying to weigh this out evenly from the standpoint that you're already short 50 officers, 60 officers, and you need to get them out on the street. So there has to be a decision there, were you're cutting out important groups, but that help would be very beneficial from other groups to help.

**John Reed:** I think the struggle is that The American policing system is a really fragmented system of almost 18,000 agencies, over half of which have 10 or fewer officers, and so you're in some jurisdictions providing those services won't be that difficult. Yet, larger populations where you might… those services might exist but in some rural jurisdictions, some small jurisdictions their closest… those just don't exist. So, filling those holes is the real challenge, I think it is providing services where they didn't exist before. Really, I think defunding is really just a spark, that defining conversation is a spark to change how some of these systems are funded. Naturally, one of the places you might take that money and redirect it is from law enforcement, but it's really a fundamental change in how we fund some of these systems, and that doesn't always mean that money has to come directly from law enforcement, but the positive thing is providing more focus and attention to these that have been long neglected: social support systems, mental health support system, systems that help people deal with addiction, and Co-occurring disorders. And that's in some places where funding is adequate and resources are good that's not such a difficult change to make, but in other places in many of these inner city agencies where they have very little to begin with that's a much more difficult conversation

**Carl Lafata:** And I would say that you would find more of you lack of resources, lack of availability of mental health treatment providers, bad things of that nature in the rural communities because what we're seeing now, is many of the issues that we used to do in the 80s, for example, in 90s attribute to the quote on quote, inner cities like substance abuse and property crime and overdoses and things of that nature, and now be following rule America in greater numbers, and so when you're looking at you know where do we take from to fund these things because obviously resources are finite tax basis or limited, you know, we look at the agency, to whom those duties currently fall, and law enforcement is indeed it because why will as we defunded the mental health system in the 1960s, 70s, 80s. Through today, what we have now is a situation weather because of substance abuse, mental illness, Co morbidity between substance abuse disorder and mental illness. Where, people that are suffering from these various disorders or conditions, are able to deteriorate conditions, are able to deteriorate to the point where they do something that's disturbing and scary, and peoples first

reaction is call 911, and so law enforcement goes out and many times use of forest or some sort of violence act needs to be dealt with, and so we're essentially stuck in a situation that's already spiraled out of control to the point again, where somebody is calling 911.

**Dr. Thor Dahle:** Yeah, and I think too… I mean over the years there's always been a whole for a wish that everybody could work together and, you know, education for poverty, for housing, etc, etc.… but, the bottom line here is there are so many entities to get together who themselves have limited budgets, and with policing I think almost every budget in the country's been reduced over the past 10 years, you know, I don't know if there's ever going to be enough money to deal with these issues effectively. Especially not get the money from law enforcement.

**Carl Lafata:** Well, I think the financial piece is critical as well because when you're asking for say we don't defund the police and use that money, and I get I'm not talking about totally different but basically defunding the police partially using that money to fund social service organizations. If we don't do that, let's say we continue operating the way we always have been then it would require a higher level of training, a higher level of experience, more mature police officers in some cases because you've all probably seen police officers not behave the best when dealing with mentally ill subjects or people that tend to be a little bit more difficult to deal with because of their substance abuse issues or because of their mental health disorders, but the problem is in this country we are not willing, nor in many cases, more importantly are we able to pay for the higher level of training education etc that is required of police officers in other industrialized nations. When you look at Japan, Germany, and even the UK, what we require of our police officers, pales in comparison, and in many states, my own home state of Michigan included, you could be 21 years of age with a GD doesn't mean you're bad person, but I remember myself at 21 years of age being as a police officer and, you know, looking back looking back at some of my younger colleagues, by the grace of God, we didn't get in any troubles, you know, how do we get around that? I don't have an answer for you.

**Dr. Nelson:** When I think this actually brings us into a kind of a good segue. So, this defunding the police has been a conversation in the past, but since May of this year it really has come to the forefront especially with the city of Minneapolis talking about defunding their Police Department. So besides dealing with crisis intervention and mental health, what other topics have you heard come up about defending the police? I'll throw out an example about the school resource officers, cutting contracts and not having police in the schools. What other types of things have you seen in relation to defunding the police that might impact policing today?

**Carl Lafata:** So, I mean, I'm sorry. Just to clarify the question is to what other areas would money be directed out other than mental health is that what the question is?

**Dr. Nelson:** Yeah, that's kind of what I'm looking. What other ones are you hearing or seeing, or think would be good candidates that would be on the discussion?

**Carl Lafata:** Well, I think one of the ones I've heard the most, and I think that makes the most sense is educational equity. That we don't, I think a lot of people feel as though schools are schools and every school is the same, but schools are locally funded and that means that they're largely dependent on the funds that local entity has. It's kind of an odd situation in this country. I think that we fund education that way we don't fund many other programs that way they're funded on a much larger basis. National Defense doesn't protect one state more than another and less than another one, but we have a lot of inequity in education which is like a fundamental foundational block that is going to set the trajectory for young people. And right now, equity doesn't exist, so we shouldn't be surprised when young people struggle to either go on to higher education or be adequately prepared for occupations that are going to pay them a living wage. And so, I think that the positive part of this defunding conversation while there's many positives but one of them is redirecting to try and solve problems before they are a problem. Trying to fix a problem when somebody is 18 or 22 years old. It's generally a little bit too late and that money is much, you know, your return on your investment is much higher when you do that at those earlier ages. If children don't learn to read by the time their 10, it's not going to be very difficult to fix that problem later.

**Dr. Thor Dahle:** Well, I also think too just based on my experience as a Michigan State Police trooper, having grown up in the Metro Detroit area interestingly, my educational experience was extremely inadequate, and when I graduated high school and decided I was going to join the military via ROTC, I actually attended by Community College and found I had to take over 20 credits over medial coursework because I wasn't able, prepared, even I was a High School graduate wasn't able to prepare to take regular coursework. In fact, when I took the GEOM to go to grad school, I had to teach myself geometry because I never had it. So, you take an agency like the Michigan State Police which is funded every year by budget, with the state budget, there is no like direct funding source. So, for example, the California Highway Patrol is funded through driver’s license and other fees. Michigan State Police has this Dickensian practice where were, you know, holding our bowls out to the legislature and asking for a little bit more each year. And I can tell you that my last five pay raises with the Michigan State Police were essentially zeros, and we were just happy that they weren't taking our medical benefits. And that was as we were pulling out of the recession, and so if there's no money for basic law enforcement, we can talk defined all we want. But there is no money to pay for or to take from to pay for the other. And so, you know, places like Detroit which have been inadequate in terms of their educational funding will continue to be so… especially in a climate in the state Lake Detroit, where they're perpetually suffering from budget shortfalls. City of Detroit, state of Michigan... sorry

**John Reed:** Yeah, and I think doctor Dahle is right on point here. Dr. Dahle mentioned education, but some of the other things that I'm really… where I think there was a lot of inequities dealing with housing, social issues like jobs, training for jobs, and those types of things, suicide attempts, you know, to help people mentally, gets back to the mental illness. A lot of people that aren't on medicine that need to be because they can't afford it. You know, those types of things, overdoses. In fact, I think there's tremendous inequity when it deals with that, and you're looking at who are the people who are actually involved in the drugs or overdosing from it. So, those are some of the things that I have either read a couple things on or have heard.

**Dr. Nelson:** Alright, so let me flip this around a little bit. We think that there are some good things to defunding the police that could be explored if done well. Right? And we all have professional experience. So, what do you think would be the downside, or what are some downsides to the current defunding the police talk?

**Carl Lafata:** My primary concern is having solutions in place before you do that. We've already talked about how police are there answering these calls now. You know, if you eliminate that without having something to replace it, there is some risk to that. And I think some of the conversations that have been out there is oftentimes they're just too superficial. Like this abolishing the funding, I guess there's a little bit of a blurred line here with the Camden example, but they talk about Camden NJ is an example of what happened when they set a success story from abolishing the agency and then starting over. But the reality was that was a really bumpy ride. That was done to break the union and restructure the agency but not in the way people often think. It took years to redirect that to a less an agency that wasn't so focused on broken windows theory and making arrests and zero tolerance policing to what it is now. So, I think that people are looking oftentimes look for solutions that are simple solutions to complex problems and just simply taking the money away without putting other support systems in place doesn't… is dangerous.

**John Reed:** I agree with that. I think part of the issue with this is organizationally, you're going to have to basically have a centralized point that's going to direct all these different bureaucratic government organizations in the direction, you know, where they want to go… where we want everybody to go. You have, if you're using as example education, you know, police have different policies and rules then do people in education, and there has to be some commonality in what we're doing, and what we're trying to accomplish, and making sure all these different people working together to try to accomplish what is the issues at hand.

**Carl Lafata:** Well, I can see downside, number one being obviously a morale issue within the Police Department, and I can tell you from my personal experience again, as a Michigan State Police trooper, I came into the Department in the late 90s when things were actually pretty decent for the agency financially, and then over the course of the 2000s into the recession of 2008 we suffered exponentially because again of the way our funding worked. And, so, we had, you know, situations where I was the only trooper sent to armed robbery calls, hold up alarms. And, when I got from Michigan to California in 2012, I was amazed, you know, that I actually had a backup officer, someone to speak with at night and they were upset because their budgets were cut to the point where they only had three people in the sector. You know, and you have no idea how good this is. And, so, the morale in Michigan State Police was really bad for a long time as a result of issues that were essentially like defunding. The governor wanted to take money from the Michigan State Police and move it to other organizations and if the Michigan sheriff's Association would have had their ducks in a row, they would have eliminated a lot of our function turned us into what is essentially the State Patrol here in Minnesota. And given our investigative arm and funding to the sheriffs of Michigan's 83 counties. And, so, that didn't happen because there's too much infighting. But the point is I witnessed first-hand the morale as well as a tactical considerations officer safety consideration that came with defunding without any sort of plan in place.

**Dr.Nelson:** Ok, so, for our last just couple of minutes here, we've kind of touched on abolish the police where there's an actual movement that we no longer need law enforcement agencies in the United States. So, I'd like to hear your personal opinions on that, and why or why you don't think it would be a functional ideal so abolish the place get rid of law enforcement altogether in the United States.

**Carl Lafata:** There are very few people that are arguing that. I mean even our organizations that sometimes it traditionally has conflicted with law enforcement like the ACLU don't aren't suggesting an elimination of the police. It's a record more of a recognition that it isn't what a lot of people think policing is where they point out 90 to 95% of police calls don't have anything to do with violent crime, much less serious issues and many times very simple issues that could be handled by other agencies. And even surveys of black residents in many areas suggest the same thing, but maybe that there's a desire to change funding. There was a survey in July that said 70% of black Americans supported reducing police budgets but less than 1/4 supported eliminating them. So, it's the idea of abolishing is I think is generally just inflammatory because it's just simply not a realistic option. Well, really anywhere.

**Dr. Dahle:** I think despite its many many flaws the field of law enforcement is so good at its job. In other words, over the course of history, we have done such a good job despite, you know, the hiccups here and there and some serious and not so serious mistakes that the public has the luxury of saying, well, why don't we just get rid of that, why don't we don't need law enforcement because we have done a masterful job of keeping the very good from the very bad. This is the same mentality that people have, and they say, why don't you just shoot to wound him or fire a warning shot. They don't understand because again we have insulated people, and so I think, you know ,obviously there's that fringe that says, I wish the police we don't need them. But I think ultimately what people really want is not so much defund. not so much abolish but make it better. Make the standards higher. They want a police officer that acts professionally, that has a level of expertise, that is commensurate with the authority that they're given. And sometimes that's hard to come by because it's financially not possible, but I think in terms of, you know, in terms of paying for higher educated peace officers and things of that nature but ultimately, you're going to find it very rare. I think that people want to abolish completely the police simply because, you know, they have no idea what is out there, and they don't care to find out.

**John Reed:** I agree, I think you heard a lot more after the incident involving George Floyd about abolishing the police. But I tend to think some of that may have been on the part of some people knee jerk reaction, if you will, to just let's get rid of the police. I think more of a push has occurred since then of getting into this defunding and redirecting some of the monies. So, I think cooler heads have prevailed in that regard.

**Dr. Nelson:** Well, thank you gentlemen. I know we have a lot more that will be discussing in the future, but I'd like to hear your perceptions on defunding police and abolish the police and, you know, we hear both of those terms together quite a bit, but I think you helped provide some clarity for that. So, thank you for joining me today.

**Carl Lafata:** Thank you for having us.

**John Reed:** thank you

**Dr. Thor Dahle:** thank you, enjoyed it!

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