

A Short History of Vera's Work on Institutions for Youth

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Whenever troubled youngsters interact with government systems, there is an opportunity to do things right—to connect with them and offer the guidance and services they need. Justice in these moments is not just a matter of fair treatment, but also of making these connections and helping young people develop healthy and fulfilling lives. By this measure, the criminal and juvenile justice systems, the child welfare system, and the public schools all fall short.

Vera is helping government agencies in all of these systems respond more appropriately and efficiently to young people’s individual needs and situations. The Institute has researched the way juvenile courts, detention centers, and other agencies function. These explorations have allowed us to see systems from many perspectives: as a young person, a senior agency official, and a frontline worker. Looking for statistical patterns in an agency’s data gives us an even fuller view. These multiple perspectives help us identify gaps in the network of agencies that serve kids and how, with our government partners, we can close them.

Vera creates demonstration projects that not only improve young people’s encounters with government, but make the most of these opportunities to offer help. The Institute has pursued its work with youth in three main areas. First, when kids do get into trouble with the law, Vera has sought to find appropriate responses to delinquency, including alternatives to court and jail. Second, Vera has researched what causes kids to become involved in delinquent, violent, and criminal behavior. Most recently, Vera has tried to prevent early adolescents from becoming involved with crime and violence, and to encourage their positive development.

Responding appropriately to delinquency

When kids enter the justice system, Vera wants to ensure that they are treated fairly and appropriately. Project Confirm, a Vera demonstration that became part of New York City’s child welfare system in 2001, prevents teens in foster care who are arrested from being unnecessarily detained. Prior to the project, arrested foster teens were often held for minor offenses, while nonfoster teens arrested for similar crimes were sent home. Police, detention workers, and court personnel often did not know when a child was in foster care. Even if they did, they did not know whom to contact within the city’s Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) to come pick the child up, appear in court, and give needed information. By the time these kids were released, their placements had often been filled, and ACS had to find them emergency placements. This disrupted children’s lives and created extra work for ACS.

In cooperation with New York City’s juvenile justice and child welfare agencies, Confirm established a system in which police and detention officers call a 24-hour hotline to verify whether a juvenile is in foster care. Hotline staffers then notify the appropriate child welfare agency to ensure that a caseworker or other responsible adult will appear on the teen’s behalf, provide information in court, and take custody if

necessary. With Confirm in place, foster teens who commit minor crimes are now no more likely to be detained than other kids.

A new Vera demonstration project seeks to keep teens from being sent to secure facilities when other, less restrictive responses to their delinquent behavior may be more helpful. Research suggests that when young people are supervised and supported in their homes and communities, rather than sent to serve time in a secure facility, they are less likely to commit further crimes. Vera and several New York City and state agencies are testing that theory with Esperanza/Hope, an initiative that urges probation officers, judges, and others to consider a range of sanctions for delinquent youth, from straight probation to intensive community-based programs. Esperanza will also launch a home-based placement program that supervises adolescents and engages their families in services.

A young person who gets in trouble with the law often has serious underlying problems, but courts and detention centers do not always recognize or address them. Another Vera demonstration, Adolescent Portable Therapy, seeks to change that by offering treatment to teens in the juvenile justice system who have serious substance abuse problems. APT begins treating teens right away, in custody, and continues treatment as they move among justice agencies and after they return home. By making treatment portable, APT hopes to provide these young people with the continuous support they need to break their pattern of drug use. And by involving the teens' families in weekly counseling sessions, APT's therapists help resolve issues at home that are connected with the drug use. Vera is evaluating APT's start-up, and will also assess its impact.

Vera is also working with city and state agencies to improve the way government responds when teens routinely skip school or break their parents' rules. Across New York State, frustrated parents bring their unruly adolescents to probation departments to ask that they be considered "persons in need of supervision" (PINS). The system often responds by placing adolescents in foster care. But most foster homes are not designed to address the problems that led the parents to seek help—not only that, foster care is an expensive way-station for many teens who ultimately return home. In New York City, working with ACS and other city agencies, Vera is designing a new response to PINS families: a respite care center that will give teens and parents a short break from each other, mediate their disputes, connect them with appropriate services, and reunite them as soon as possible.

Elsewhere in New York State, Vera is helping county officials rethink the way they serve PINS families after a new law expanded eligibility in 2002, allowing parents to bring 16- and 17-year-olds to the system for the first time. First, Vera analyzed the PINS system statewide and projected how demands for services would increase with an influx of older teens. Then in 2002, Vera's Youth Justice Program brought together teams of juvenile justice practitioners to help county officials prepare for the change. Through peer-to-peer assistance, the program is supporting local governments as they adjust to increased demands despite tight budgets. Several counties are launching innovative programs that avoid costly foster placements to meet the challenge.

From its earliest days, Vera has experimented with diverting young offenders away from courts and jails when alternatives are more appropriate. Indeed, one of Vera's first demonstration projects was such a program. In 1967 Vera launched the Court

Employment Project (CEP), which intervened after arrest but before trial to offer young people counseling, job training, and employment. If the defendants cooperated, their criminal charges were dropped. CEP tried to prevent criminal careers from developing—by helping these young people address their personal problems and get good jobs—while also conserving court resources.

CEP inspired similar programs nationwide. But a Vera evaluation revealed that the program was not achieving what it set out to do. CEP was not diverting cases that were likely to be prosecuted, but enrolling juveniles whose cases, for various reasons, were not destined for prosecution. Vera redesigned the program to enroll juveniles convicted of a first serious felony. In 1989 the new CEP merged with another Vera demonstration project, the Community Service Sentencing Project, to form the Center for Alternate Sentencing and Employment Services (CASES). When young offenders are sentenced to CEP supervision, they receive the educational assistance and job training they need to continue schooling or enter the job market.

In 1970 Vera began a program with similar goals, the Neighborhood Youth Diversion Program. Aimed at offenders up to age 16 in a predominantly African-American and Latino Bronx neighborhood, the program offered community-based mediation and counseling as an alternative to family court. It sought to keep kids' families together and help them grow in a positive direction. The heart of the initiative was the Youth Forum, where community members volunteered as mediators to resolve conflicts. In six years, the program diverted more than 1,800 juveniles. In 1979, it became an independent nonprofit, Neighborhood Youth and Family Services. Since then, the organization has retained its focus on keeping families together by working to prevent kids' placement in foster care. It offers an array of services to families, such as substance abuse treatment, parenting classes, and legal advocacy.

Understanding youth crime and violence

Vera has long sought to understand the causes of youth violence and delinquency. In 1995, Vera began a four-year, ethnographic study of how adolescents experience and deal with violence. Vera researchers followed 75 middle-school students in three different New York City neighborhoods to document their everyday encounters with violence. The research looked at how and why kids become involved in violence as perpetrators, victims, and witnesses. The work produced a rare insider's view of how violent encounters develop among adolescents and how they can become full-blown conflicts or be resolved with the help of caring adults. One report explored the overlap between violent incidents on and off school grounds; another examined the issues immigrant adolescents face in violent neighborhoods. Overall, the research suggests that adolescents need their parents, school personnel, and community members to take a more active role in keeping them safe.

As the ethnographic research was getting underway, Vera organized and hosted a residential workshop on adolescent violence in April 1997, bringing together experts from across the United States. Researchers, child welfare administrators, school principals, judges, federal officials, and foundation officers all shared their knowledge about concrete ways to prevent and reduce adolescent violence.

Vera's recent work in this area builds on research done in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1975, at the Ford Foundation's request, Vera began to define and quantify violence among juvenile delinquents. In reviewing the literature, Vera found that scant research and few resources had been devoted to this group. Vera researchers explored the scope of juvenile violence, as well as treatment and prevention alternatives, by analyzing juvenile court records in the New York metropolitan area and by interviewing actors in the justice system—judges, lawyers, prosecutors, psychiatrists, and probation officers. The research concluded that despite the fact that juvenile violence was a serious and growing problem, “violent or seriously disturbed delinquents...are frequently denied access to effective help.” Training schools and probation, two common responses to violent young offenders at the time, did not provide constructive treatment. The research was published as a book, *Violent Delinquents*.

Vera further explored justice system responses to young offenders in a 1986 report, *Criminal Careers of Juveniles in New York City*. In this research, Vera documented the later criminal careers of a group of 12- to 15-year-olds arrested in 1977 and 1978. The research tested whether arrests at this age were accurate predictors of adult criminal activity and found that they were not. This finding argued against the notion that the people responsible for the most crimes can be identified early and confined. Not only couldn't researchers predict who would become a high-rate offender, the report found, they also could not account for the fact that most juveniles stop committing crimes.

As part of the effort to understand the roots of crime and violence, Vera has explored the relationship between youth crime and employment. Do young people commit crimes as a source of income? If they had jobs, would they commit fewer crimes? Vera researchers evaluated jobs programs that sought to stem crime and looked at whether more employment would mean less crime. In the early 1980s, Vera set up and oversaw the Alternative Youth Employment Strategies (AYES) program, a demonstration project in three cities that tested whether a jobs program would improve young people's later job market outcomes and lower their chances of becoming involved with crime. The program, which targeted disadvantaged teens, improved employment but had no effect on future criminal involvement.

In 1984, Vera researchers produced *Employment and Crime: A Summary Report*. This report found that most young people “age out” of criminal behavior as they mature, and that they do not necessarily commit crimes because they cannot secure employment. At the end of the decade, Vera's ethnographic research among young males in New York City was published in 1989 as *Getting Paid: Youth Crime and Work in the Inner City*.

The research pointed to two policy implications: improve educational attainment and job prospects for young people in the inner city; and, when seeking to explain their behavior, view them as members of larger social contexts. This study was one of the first to use a comparative, ethnographic approach to understanding crime.

Vera's research showed that the relationship between juvenile crime and unemployment is complicated. A certain amount of criminal involvement may be an act of rebellion for younger adolescents. Further, young people do need jobs in the short term, but more than that, they need long-term investment in their communities. Finally, the AYES project showed that one-time exposure to a jobs program cannot be expected to transform the circumstances that led to a young person's criminal involvement.

Keeping kids away from crime and violence and promoting their healthy development

Keeping young people from getting involved with delinquency and encouraging their healthy development are at the heart of a Vera effort to promote academic success for children in foster care. Research has shown that early adolescents who have been abused are at greater risk for failure in school and delinquency, and that academic achievement strongly counteracts the disadvantages they face. A recent Vera demonstration, Safe and Smart, placed child welfare workers in five New York City middle schools to offer intensive support to children in foster care. Through one-on-one and group sessions, ACS caseworkers trained as "school specialists" worked closely with these students, helping them deal with learning problems, depression, and other issues in hopes of improving their attendance and grades.

In June 2002, the school-based phase of Safe and Smart ended. After three years, Vera learned important lessons about what hinders foster children. They often have gaps in their schooling because of difficulties with registration and school transfers, they are often not placed appropriately in special education, and their foster parents could take a more active role in their schoolwork. Working with ACS, the city's Department of Education, and the city's family court, Vera is taking steps to make success in school a permanent priority for foster children. In monthly trainings that were piloted by Safe and Smart, educators are showing caseworkers how to navigate the school system on behalf of foster children. And Vera and ACS have created an educational checklist that family court judges and caseworkers will use to monitor children's performance. Confident that these strategies will be useful in other jurisdictions, Vera will produce and disseminate a series of publications that share the lessons with child care workers nationwide.

Recently, Vera's research department has worked closely with ACS to help the agency learn more about the children in its care and how it can better serve them. To facilitate ACS's own reform agenda, Vera researchers have documented broad changes in

the foster care system over time, the use of group care placements, what happens to children who enter care as early adolescents, and how children's foster care experiences affect their education. Another effort is assessing a new program, run by ACS and the New York City Police Department, that sends a child welfare worker and a detective to jointly respond to reports of severe child abuse and neglect quickly—within two hours. The Instant Response Teams project seeks to improve evidence collection in these cases and minimize further trauma to children by interviewing them in child-friendly settings and by limiting the number of times they must tell their stories.

Unfortunately, young people can also be exposed to violence at school. Vera has undertaken several efforts to make schools safer for all students in recent years. In 1999, the Institute analyzed the ways local governments and schools approach school safety in America's largest cities. The result was a report to the New York State Governor's Task Force on School Safety, much of which was endorsed by the governor. That research led to other school safety initiatives at Vera.

A current Vera demonstration project, Affirm, is working to improve safety in New York City schools. In New York and other cities, law enforcement officers generally patrol school grounds to keep kids in line. These officers play an important role when violence erupts, but rarely are they trained in how to foster positive behavior to prevent violence. In collaboration with the NYPD, the city's department of education, and local school officials, Vera is implementing Affirm, a training program that shows school safety agents how to notice and reinforce constructive behavior among students. Affirm seeks not only to reduce disorder and violence in schools, but to improve relationships between young people and law enforcement officers. Vera launched the program in 2001 and is evaluating its impact.

Vera has also helped communities across New York City form teams that tackle and work to prevent common safety problems in and around schools. The teams take a geographic approach—grouping high schools with elementary and middle schools in the same area—and engage key community members, such as police officers, merchants, and residents as well as teachers, school safety agents, and parents. In collaboration with the city's education and police departments, Vera coordinated a communitywide school safety planning process in two Brooklyn neighborhoods that was later replicated in several others. Teams in each neighborhood meet monthly to discuss problems and to implement safety projects tailored to local needs, such as a 'safe corridor' students can use to travel to and from school. The city's education department recently took the project over, and will oversee its expansion.

Vera began work on school safety in 1998, when the Institute helped the then-Board of Education restructure the way safety incidents are recorded. The result is a more precise reporting system that breaks down offenses by severity and type, makes it easier for administrators to see which schools have the most serious safety problems, and allows

them to target their responses. Vera also helped assess the transfer of school safety agents from the education department to the police department.

Another violence prevention effort took place in Family Court. In the winter of 1997, Vera briefly ran a special court for juveniles caught for the first time with a weapon. Over four hours, weapons experts, gunshot victims, police officers, and teens who used to carry weapons talked to these young offenders. The goal of the project was to leave kids with an immediate and strong impression about the consequences of using weapons, rather than simply process them through the court system.

Techniques for Innovation

While Vera's government partners want to be more responsive to the children in their care, they also have finite resources. The innovations Vera builds must work within the constraints of these resources and win political support, or they will not last. Vera uses several techniques in different combinations to build such innovations. We focus on specific problems, create new options, provide new information, and build incentives for officials to use the new options or act on new information. Finally, Vera evaluates the results of its work. A closer look at two projects shows how the techniques work.

With the Court Employment Project, Vera presented a new option: prosecutors could divert young offenders to a program that offered job training and counseling, rather than prosecute them in family court. The incentives to use CEP seemed clear. The program promised to conserve prosecution, court, and detention resources. It also aimed to cut short criminal careers, a long-term benefit to society and the criminal justice system. But the incentives for individual prosecutors to use the program as designed proved too remote. A Vera evaluation showed that the program was not diverting juveniles from court: it was enrolling youths who were unlikely to be prosecuted. With this knowledge, Vera redesigned the program to serve more serious young offenders after conviction.

With Project Confirm (now part of ACS), we focused on a specific group of juveniles in detention: foster kids. Confirm staffers provide crucial information to players in the juvenile justice system and to ACS caseworkers that allows foster kids to be released to responsible adults. Senior officials certainly had incentives to support Project Confirm. The program promises to reduce overcrowding in juvenile detention centers, relieve stress on ACS's emergency placement services, and prevent kids from moving to new placements. To realize those benefits, Project Confirm formed close alliances with ACS managers, the individuals responsible for monitoring caseworkers and creating incentives for them to appear in court and welcome children back into foster homes.

Vera's work with young people—from our early research on violent delinquents to our latest demonstration projects focusing on youth in the PINS and juvenile justice systems—has given us valuable knowledge about juveniles themselves, and about the systems that serve them. We hope that this knowledge and experience, together with the

relationships we enjoy with officials throughout these systems, puts the Institute in a strong position to improve young people's encounters with government and improve these systems.

Chronology of Vera's Work on Youth Safety and Justice

- 1967 Court Employment Project [spun off in 1989 as part of CASES]
- 1970 Neighborhood Youth Diversion Program [spun off in 1979 as Neighborhood Youth and Family Services]
- 1975 Study of violence among juvenile delinquents [published as *Violent Delinquents* in 1978]
- 1975 Employment and Crime Project [concluded in 1984]
- 1980 Alternative Youth Employment Strategies Project [evaluation completed in 1983]
- 1986 *Criminal Careers of Juveniles in New York City*
- 1989 *Getting Paid: Youth Crime and Work in the Inner City*
- 1995 Ethnographic research on adolescent violence
- 1997 Weapons Court
- 1996 Residential workshop on adolescent violence
- 1998 Project Confirm [became part of city's ACS in 2001]
- 1999 Report to the New York State Governor's Task Force on School Safety
- 1999 Safe and Smart [continuing]
- 2000 Development of School Safety Demonstration Project
- 2001 Adolescent Portable Therapy [continuing]
- 2001 Report on the PINS System in New York State
- 2001 Youth Justice Program launched
- 2001 Communitywide School Safety Planning Project
- 2002 Affirm: Reinforcing Positive Student Behavior for Safer Schools
- 2002 Esperanza/Hope: Home-Based Placements for Juvenile Delinquents

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