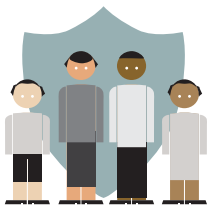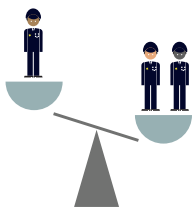# Vera Institute of Justice: Policing Program

The Vera Institute of Justice's (Vera's) Policing Program is dedicated to fundamentally shifting the culture of policing from one that incentivizes and defaults to enforcement to one that delivers and rewards public safety through community engagement and satisfaction. Ruptured relations between police and many of the communities they serve represents one of the greatest challenges facing contemporary American society. In order to bridge this gulf, Vera seeks to engage in projects that advance alternatives to enforcement in order to maximize public safety and enhance community relations.

Values

American policing is at a difficult crossroads. All people want to feel safe in their homes, communities, and places of work. Historically, American communities have charged the police with the function of safeguarding public security, but longstanding fractured relationships between police and many communities—particularly communities of color—and an overreliance on punitive enforcement, especially for minor transgressions, has resulted in a recurring adversarial dynamic. This problem is viewed from extremely different, and sometimes conflicting, perspectives by members of law enforcement and the communities they serve.

Some communities feel overpoliced and underprotected. The roots of policing, in particular the role of police in enforcing laws and policies that criminalized people of color, continue to shape some Americans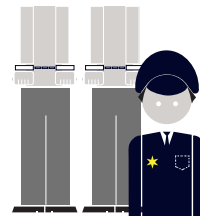' perceptions and interactions with law enforcement today. Other marginalized and vulnerable groups, such as people with disabilities or behavioral health disorders, homeless people, LGBTQI people, and immigrants fear and distrust the police. Moreover, recent highly publicized incidents involving what many regard as inappropriate use of force have further eroded public trust in law enforcement.

Police officers receive limited support and too often lack alternatives to enforcement. Members of law enforcement feel that police officers—whose jobs, by nature, put them at risk—do not receive the support they need. Indeed, high profile killings of police officers have signaled to many that police are under siege. Further, police are expected to respond to a broad range of issues: family disputes, mental health crises, and even blocked driveways. Yet they often have few, if any, tools to respond beyond enforcement, which current organizational practices, professional culture, and other external demands prioritize and even incentivize. This dynamic further complicates community-police relations and puts pressure on the police to apply enforcement even when to do so may not address the underlying issues, and other, less punitive means may be just as effective—or even more so.
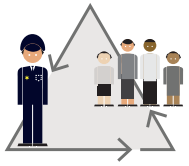
Key Facts

American policing is overreliant on punitive enforcement. While much of the demand for police activity is driven by service calls from the community, many of our nation's officers know well that the majority of their duties require problem solving and customer service and they, together with community members, are hungry for alternatives to enforcement. They know that punitive enforcement is frequently applied in circumstances that do not involve serious crimes:

› Consistently, over the past several decades, fewer than 5 percent of arrests were for violent crimes.

› Over one million arrests are made each year for drug possession alone, about 600,000 of which are for possession of marijuana.

› Millions of additional tickets, summonses, and stops are issued for other low-level wrongdoings.

This overuse of enforcement has resulted in a recurring adversarial dynamic that fans the flames of deeply rooted acrimony toward police in certain communities already experiencing enduring problems of poverty, high crime rates, and limited access to social services. Damaged police-community relations make it more difficult for police to execute their most critical responsibility: to respond to violent crime and protect public safety. In those communities where distrust in police is high, people are less likely to report a crime or offer witness testimony, which impedes effective policing.

Approach

Vera's Policing Program seeks to shift law enforcement culture and practice from one of enforcement to one of community engagement while maintaining public safety. Our task is to reimagine the role of police in our communities. Choosing the best path at this crossroads in American policing will require a collaborative effort that includes law enforcement and other justice practitioners, community members, policymakers, and experts. By developing new data-driven tools, assisting local governments and community leaders with policy development, and conducting research, we aim to provide alternatives to punitive enforcement and enhance community-police collaborative problem solving.

Our efforts are concentrated primarily in three areas: shifting the discourse on policing; reengineering police incentives and performance management; and developing innovative strategies to reduce enforcement. To shift the discourse on policing, we seek to shine a light on enforcement trends and enforcement's impact on incarceration through elevating data-driven and evidence-informed practices, as well as the voices of innovative police practitioners and community partners. Similarly, we strive to shape policing culture by introducing more comprehensive, positive, and community-informed metrics into reengineered police performance management systems to incentivize quality over quantity and to prioritize long-term problem identification and solving, instead of punitive enforcement, which typically involves a short-term remedy that does not address the underlying factors causing the behavior. Finally, by partnering with police agencies across the country, we are working to develop innovative alternatives to enforcement that better address the root causes of crime without overburdening police departments or necessitating undue justice system contact for community members. Some of our current projects within each of these three areas include:

1. Shifting the discourse on policing

› **Emerging Issues in American Policing Digest.** This quarterly digest makes new and innovative policing research accessible and applicable to practitioners and community members who are aiming to implement evidence-informed strategies and practices.

› **Visualizing Enforcement.** This interactive online tool enables users to easily explore and interpret a wealth of policing data and to better understand factors that contribute to police enforcement and how it affects individual communities and the nation as a whole.

2. Reengineering police performance management

› **CompStat360.** CompStat360 is a modern police management framework that leverages the strengths of traditional CompStat with the values of community support and involvement, organizational effectiveness, and crime to promote effective and efficient evidence-based policing.

3. Developing innovative policing strategies and alternatives to enforcement

› **911 Calls for Service.** To inform service delivery strategies, reduce reliance on enforcement, and enhance safety and well-being, Vera's Policing Program is defining the landscape of 911 calls for service, including why they are placed, how they are processed, what outcomes they produce, and what alternatives exist.

› **Serving Safely.** By managing training and technical assistance and developing a national training curriculum and research agenda, this national initiative is designed to enhance interactions between police and persons with mental illnesses and/or developmental disabilities.

Vera INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE

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