



VERA SNAPSHOT 2015





Sen. Cory Booker and Marshall Project Editor Bill Keller discuss the state of criminal justice reform at Vera's "Crime Bill@20" event in Washington, DC

VERA'S MISSION is to be change agents working alongside government and other leaders on the frontlines of justice to help build and improve systems that ensure fairness, promote safety, and strengthen communities. What follows are nine other ways in which we worked to seize this opportunity—and seed further opportunities going forward—with a focus on our core priorities: reducing mass incarceration by stopping the overuse of local jails; improving conditions for people living in our prisons and jails; and, in a soon-to-be majority-minority nation, improving trust in the justice system, particularly between law enforcement and the communities they serve.



The year 2015 was unlike any other in recent memory for those working in criminal justice reform. We saw the first sitting president visit a federal prison, and remark that he was “there but for the grace of God.” Congress debated major bipartisan criminal justice reform legislation. A Supreme Court justice called for an examination of our use of solitary confinement. And for too many, justice was not delivered in time—Kalief Browder, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, to name but a few.


As consensus for change gained increasing public and bipartisan support at the federal, state, and local levels, we began the year in Washington, DC, **bringing together policymakers and influencers** to talk about a path forward on criminal justice reform. It was the culmination of our **multimedia campaign** to recognize the 20th anniversary of the 1994 Crime Bill—and positioned us to look ahead to what 2016, and its election, may hold as we continue to advance reform.

**We worked to close
incarceration's front
door—our local jails**

Ending mass incarceration where it starts



In February, **[Incarceration's Front Door: The Misuse of Jails in America](#)** made the growth and current use of our nation's jails headline news in the **[New York Times](#)**, **[Buzzfeed](#)**, the **[Wall Street Journal](#)**, the **[Associated Press](#)**, and many more. The comprehensive report was published as part of the **[Safety and Justice Challenge](#)**, a new initiative funded by the MacArthur Foundation to reduce over-incarceration by changing the way America thinks about and uses jails. Vera also worked on the ground in five of the Challenge's 20 selected jurisdictions to help them analyze their systems and plan ways to reform the way jail is used. Last month, we released the **[Incarceration Trends Project](#)**, an online interactive tool that collates and analyzes more than 14 million data points about jail incarceration in each of the nation's 3,000 counties. Justice system stakeholders and others are using the tool to study their own jurisdiction's jail and understand how it compares with others over time, revealing surprising insights about who we incarcerate in our own backyards. Initial findings from the tool, including that small counties have driven the bulk of growth, were spotlighted in the **[Associated Press](#)**, the Washington Post's **[Wonkblog](#)**, **[VICE News](#)**, **[Vox](#)**, and other outlets across the country.



We're working to keep people out of Rikers Island Jail by helping New York City reform the way it uses bail. In collaboration with the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice and other stakeholders, we identified key areas of needed reform in New York's bail system, conducted trainings on alternative forms of bail with every public defender office in the five boroughs, and piloted a study in the arraignment courts on using bail alternatives such as paying bail by credit card. And we're working to help people returning from prison or jail to go back to their families living in public housing, [as recently described on NPR](#).

We focused on our home base—New York City—where we are part of major efforts to reform the justice system.

Ending mass incarceration where it starts

We partnered with New York City's public radio station WNYC to launch a [blog series](#) and [event](#) to accompany their broadcast series addressing the intersection of poverty, mental illness, and the criminal justice system. And our research department evaluated the nation's first [social impact bond](#)—an innovative form of pay-for-success contracting that leverages private funding to finance public services—to fund the Adolescent Behavioral Learning Experience (ABLE) for youth at Rikers Island.



Ending mass incarceration where it starts

Ten years after Katrina, we celebrated changes in the justice system in New Orleans—where we went to help after the storm—and pushed for more.

Members of Vera's New Orleans office co-authored an [essay for The Data Center's New Orleans's Index at Ten Collection](#) outlining New Orleans' use of local incarceration in the 10 years since Hurricane Katrina—the city now incarcerates less than a third of the number of people on the eve of the storm and half the post-Katrina high. Along with the essay, we published a [blog series](#) with the voices of those who fought for reform highlighting how far we have come, how far we still have to go, and where New Orleans fits in the national movement to end the over-use of local incarceration.

Improving conditions of confinement



We helped corrections officials foster the human dignity needed for true rehabilitation that preserves public safety.

With support from the Bureau of Justice Assistance, we launched our **Safe Alternatives to Segregation Initiative**, working on the ground with jurisdictions ready to make changes to their use of solitary confinement. We also drew national attention to the issue with our report on common misconceptions about—and emerging alternatives to—the practice of solitary confinement, which was leveraged at a **convening** in Washington, DC where corrections leaders, experts in the field, people who have experienced solitary confinement, and the media discussed actionable strategies for reform. At the event, Vera launched a **new public online resource center** dedicated to collating the best information in the field to help jurisdictions take steps toward alternative practices. And in the field of prison education—

another way to improve conditions of confinement so that people have a better chance of success during reentry—we launched a **new resource center** to help policymakers implement and expand quality higher education in prison programs. Vera will also provide technical assistance to correctional facilities as part of the recently announced **Second Chance Pell Pilot** initiative to allow eligible people incarcerated in state and federal prisons to pursue postsecondary education via Pell Grants—federal financial aid to which they had been denied access via the 1994 Crime Bill.



Improving conditions of confinement

We took an American delegation to Germany to observe and learn from a system based on rehabilitation, not retribution.

“What We Learned in German Prisons,” a [New York Times op-ed](#) by Vera President Nicholas Turner and John Jay College of Criminal Justice President Jeremy Travis, paints a picture of how a country that learned from its own terrible legacy could inform the future of America’s journey toward reform. [The Marshall Project](#) and [VICE](#) also chronicled the trip, and later, USA Today columnist Ellis Cose was inspired to [take his own tour](#). The exchange—which aimed to expose American policymakers and other opinion leaders to sentencing and corrections practices used internationally—included Connecticut Governor Dannel Malloy, whose observations on the trip helped inform his recently announced [plan](#) to improve responses to young adults in the criminal justice system—including by building a dedicated facility for young people 18 to 25 years old.



POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS


Building trust in the justice system

We advanced the critical task of restoring community trust in police.


Vera President Nicholas Turner submitted [written testimony](#) to President Obama's Task Force on 21st Century Policing on the topic of building trust and legitimacy between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve. [Compstat 2.0](#), our new initiative with the Police Foundation, will help police departments to better integrate community policing practices into their operations by using the same management tool (Compstat) that currently tracks and measures enforcement responses to crime rates. And, recognizing that police are often burdened with being default treatment providers to millions of people with substance use and mental health disorders, we published a [guide](#) on how law enforcement policymakers and practitioners—in collaboration with public health officials and harm reduction advocates—can enhance both public safety and community health by adopting practices such as overdose prevention training.

Building trust in the justice system

We met the needs of underserved victims, expanding our work to reach two groups often excluded from traditional victim services: survivors with disabilities and young men of color.

A black and white photograph showing the lower half of a person walking a dog on a leash. The person is wearing light-colored pants and a belt. The dog is a dark-colored breed, possibly a Labrador, and is walking on a paved surface. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting like a park or a walkway.

To mark the 25th anniversary of a landmark step toward equitable access for people with disabilities—the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)—we hosted a summit in Washington, DC, where leaders in the field discussed progress made since the passage of the ADA, and opportunities to bridge the gaps that remain for people with disabilities involved in the justice system. Our work to address the needs of people with disabilities and Deaf people this year included launching the first **website** exclusively dedicated to ending abuse against people with disabilities. This features resources such as our five **first-in-kind** guides to help organizations better serve these survivors.

A black and white photograph of a young man walking. He is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved button-down shirt and has a large backpack on his back. He is looking off to the side with a thoughtful expression. The background is a blurred indoor setting, possibly a transit station or a hallway.

And the work of our **Common Justice** demonstration project, which provides innovative services to crime survivors—especially young men of color whose needs are otherwise unmet—was elevated in **The New Yorker**, on **NPR**, and in a must-watch segment on “The Case for Diversion” in **The Atlantic’s Race and Justice in America 2015 summit**.

Building trust in the justice system

Juvenile justice system reform



We convened a series of **Congressional briefings** on adolescent brain research, the systemic causes of youth contact with the justice system, and the implications for future legal standards and best practices. And in our home state of New York—one of two states that currently tries all 16- and 17-year-olds as adults—we supported the Governor’s Commission on Youth, Public Safety and Justice with the publication of a **report** by the commission on how to raise the age of juvenile jurisdiction in New York.

Indigent defense & unaccompanied immigrant youth

Our New York Immigrant Family Unity Project (NYIFUP), which provides representation to indigent detained immigrants, expanded this year to the Ulster Immigration Court in Napanoch, NY. A NYIFUP client was recently a defendant in a case that led to a groundbreaking decision by the Second Circuit, which ruled that detained immigrants could not be held in detention for more than six months without a bond hearing. And a study on the

experiences of unaccompanied immigrant children—that involved the youth themselves—found that many youth felt a loss of identity when they arrived in the U.S. and had experienced discrimination, suspicion, and confusion from adults and peers, and pointed to how policy and practice can better support these children.