



Reimagining Crisis Response:

A New Approach to Community Safety

Government leaders have charged police with addressing complex problems like homelessness, mental health crises, and substance use, without giving them the tools or capacity to do so effectively.

Meanwhile, far too often, police respond aggressively to minor crimes — sometimes with tragic results. Excessively punitive approaches to crime have contributed to record-setting incarceration rates, unsustainable expenditures by taxpayers, and long-term consequences for individuals and communities. These harms are most acutely felt by Black, Brown, and Indigenous people and their communities.



1 OUT OF 2

*Black American men
will experience arrest
by age 23.¹*

25%

*of fatal officer-involved
shootings involve a person
with signs of mental illness²*



240 MILLION

*calls to 911 each year;
of those, few are in response
to violent crime³*

To build safe communities, police must use their arrest powers sparingly and equitably, people in crisis should receive the help they need, and policies at all levels of government should support community well-being.



THE PROBLEMS

- **Outdated and inflexible methods of responding to public calls for help have led to an inefficient (and sometimes harmful) crisis response system.** So much of our criminal justice system begins with a call to 911, and flaws within this system — whether a failure to communicate information, to think critically about the proper deployment of resources, or to offer alternatives to armed police responses — can set off a spiral of consequences that too often ends in tragedy.
- **Police-led responses lead to an overreliance on arrest and incarceration for low-level offenses.** Overly punitive policing strategies are an expensive and ineffective approach to promoting community safety, stability, and well-being. Our country's consistently high level of incarceration carries substantial costs for both the government and communities.⁴ The United States spends approximately \$80 billion annually on corrections—with the majority of this budget dedicated to the costs of incarceration.⁵ For an individual, an arrest can cause significant psychological distress⁶ and lead to a chain of civil consequences,⁷ including a sacrifice of time, money (e.g., arrest fees, booking fees, attorney fees), and opportunities. For all that, we know widespread enforcement of low-level crimes has had a limited effect on deterring crime.⁸
- **Police enforcement of low-level conduct leads to racially disparate outcomes.** Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities experience aggressive policing practices such as stop, question, and frisk; excessive enforcement of minor offenses; and geographically targeted policing.⁹ The over-enforcement of low-level crimes carries a wide range of damaging collateral consequences for those targeted, and also undermines democratic values, perpetuates historic disadvantage, and jeopardizes community safety.¹⁰
- **Community safety strategies that focus solely on police are inadequate and ineffective.** Officers often do not have the necessary skills or support to address the underlying causes of homelessness, mental health crises, and substance use, which means they are hindered in their ability to solve problems in ways that dignify the people they are sworn to serve.

THE SOLUTIONS

- **Transform the 911 system.** We must promote policy and practice innovations that transform 911 centers and responses to calls for service. This will help ensure that the deployment of public safety resources is efficient, equitable, and responsive to community needs.
- **Support the expansion of non-custodial alternatives and pre-arrest diversion programs.** Practices that reduce reliance on custodial arrests for low-level offenses should be tested, evaluated, and promoted. This includes expanding citation authority and funding pre-arrest diversion strategies. Expanded use of these alternatives, paired with a rigorous learning agenda to interrogate which approaches work best, will allow police to better serve their communities.
- **Promote transparency and accountability by enabling the monitoring of police responses.** Advocates and agencies should be connected with researchers and data experts to build greater capacity for data collection and analysis of policing practices, with the goal of reducing racial disparities and providing communities with the tools to engage in policy discussions. This capacity will improve transparency and accountability and allow agencies and the communities they serve to work together to achieve a common vision of community safety.
- **Scale and sustain data-driven multi-agency strategies to improve the government's response to vulnerable populations.** The Data-Driven Justice Initiative supports communities in implementing data-driven multi-agency responses to improve outcomes for frequent utilizers — those with serious behavioral and physical health conditions who cycle through jails, hospital emergency rooms, and behavioral health services — and other vulnerable populations.



RESOURCES

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- 4 Carson, Ann. 2018. *Prisoners in 2016*. BJS.gov. <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p16.pdf>.
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- 8 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2018. *Proactive Policing: Effects on Crime and Communities*. N.p.: NAS. <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/24928/proactive-policing-effects-on-crime-and-communities>.
- 9 Neusteter, Rebecca, Ram Subramanian, Jennifer Trone, Mawia Khogali, and Cindy Reed. 2019. *Gatekeepers: The Role of Police in Ending Mass Incarceration*. Vera.org. <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/gatekeepers-police-and-mass-incarceration.pdf>.
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