

*Alternatives to Policing: An  
Overview of Community-based  
Approaches to Public Safety*

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Founded in 1961, the Vera Institute of Justice is a justice change agent. We work to tackle the most pressing injustices of our day—from ending mass criminalization and incarceration, addressing racial disparities, reckoning with the loss of public confidence in our justice systems, to meeting the needs of justice-involved people who are vulnerable and marginalized.

# Reducing the Footprint of Policing

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## Alternatives to Enforcement:

- 911 criterion-based dispatching
- Misdemeanor decriminalization and legalization

## Alternatives to Policing:

- mobile crisis response teams for behavioral health
- Street violence interrupters
- Unarmed, civilian traffic enforcement agents

# Scoping the Problem: Policing in America

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- Over 50 million U.S. residents 16 or older have contact with law enforcement annually. Vehicle stops and traffic enforcement are the most frequent reason for contact; traffic accidents.
- Calls for service: mostly 911; both citizen and officer initiated. Many calls police respond to are related to noncriminal matters (ex. homelessness, mediating disputes between neighbors, noise complaints, found property).
- How many calls are for serious violent crime: New Orleans (1%), Seattle (1.3%), Sacramento (1.4%), Tucson (0.7%).

# Scoping the Problem: Policing in America Cont.

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- Over 10.5 million arrests a year. Less than 5% are for crimes of serious violence. Black people make up 12 percent of the U.S. population, but an estimated 28 percent of all arrests.
- State and local spending on police has increased from \$42.3 billion in 1977 to \$114.5 billion in 2017.
- In many cities, 30 percent or more of municipal spending through discretionary or general funds goes to police departments.

# First Efforts in Denver

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- Legalization of marijuana
- Removing School Resource Officers (SROs) by 2021-2022
- Support Team Assistance Response (STAR)

# 911 Is The Front Door

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- Over 240 million 911 calls in US each year, little know about them
- Game of telephone: caller to call-taker to CAD to dispatcher to police officers
- More than half of all dispatch records may be miscategorized
- In some cities, officer-initiated “jobs” are more common than 911 calls
- Criterion-based dispatching (CBD) is used for EMS 911 calls and may be useful to divert police 911 calls to non-enforcement responses

# Ending Misdemeanor Policing

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# Ending Misdemeanor Policing Cont.

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## Evidence from NYC:

- Criminal Justice Reform Act (CJRA) in force as of July 2017
- 5 acts that led to 50% of all criminal summonses pre-CJRA: open container, public urination, excessive noise, littering, parks violations
- CRJA: decriminalized violations, lowered fines, comm service option
- Warrants for CJRA behaviors down 94% in first year; criminal court appearance rates for all offenses increased from 63% to 71%
- New civil court received high ratings from summons recipients
- Focus groups in highly-impacted neighborhoods: no increase in frequency of behaviors connected to CJRA

# Ending Misdemeanor Policing Cont.

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## Evidence from Philadelphia:

- Between 2014-18 marijuana possession, disorderly conduct, and sex work were decriminalized.
- Since 2014, total arrests have fallen by over 45%. Decriminalization was responsible for over 17% of that decline.
- In 2010, PPD made 14,458 arrests for these three offenses, 16.10% of all arrests in the city that year. By 2018, only 3,148 arrests, a 78.22% decline.
- Racial disparities persistent.

# Crisis Alternatives: Mental Health, Substance Use and Homelessness

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- Police have become default first responders for behavioral health crises
- Without careful planning, many crisis response programs risk doubling down on the role of law enforcement
- Communities lack comprehensive services to address behavioral health needs before, during, and after a crisis – all of which are necessary to support health-first approaches

# Crisis Alternatives Cont.

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- CAHOOTS (Eugene, OR)



# Crisis Alternatives Cont.

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- CRU/Familiar Faces (Olympia, WA)
- Portland Street Response (Portland, OR)



# Violence Prevention Programs

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- Effective, community-based, affordable approaches to reduce gun crime using public health approaches
- Credible messengers/neighborhood change agents/violence interrupters work in community to defuse potential flashpoints
- Racial reconciliation component
- More effective than increased police presence or harsher penalties
- Cease Fire, CureViolence, Group Violence Intervention, etc.
- Widespread support even among conservatives

# Traffic Enforcement and Vehicle Stops

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- Police stop 50,000+ drivers per day & 20 million+ each year
- Most common police/civilian interaction
- Unbridled discretion of police to use as pretext for searches, etc.
- Racial disparities in stops, lower suspicion threshold to search Black and Latinx drivers
- Nonpolice models for traffic enforcement:
  - Highways England traffic officers
  - Berkeley CA will implement unarmed civilian traffic enforcement
  - NYPD Traffic Enforcement Agents not police, may be shifted back to DOT





# Questions? Comments?

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