

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/gatekeepers-police-and-mass-incarceration>

Policy Issue Resources

Publication

Police in America arrest millions of people each year, and the likelihood that arrest will lead to jail incarceration has increased steadily. Ending mass incarceration and repairing its extensive collateral consequences thus must begin by focusing on the front end of the system: police work. Recognizing the roughly 18,000 police agencies around the country as gatekeepers of the system, this report explores the factors driving mass enforcement, particularly of low-level offenses; what police agencies could do instead with the right community investment, national and local leadership, and officer training, incentives, and support; and policies that could shift the policing paradigm away from the reflexive use of enforcement, which unnecessarily criminalizes people and leads directly to the jailhouse door.

There is a moral and strategic imperative to reshape police culture and incentives to ensure that the exercise of police discretion is more deliberate, transparent, and accountable and that policing practices are focused more tightly on dramatically reining in arrests, while promoting lesser forms of enforcement and holding officers and departments accountable.

A punitive approach to law enforcement makes policing vastly more dangerous for both members of the public and officers, creates ripples of social and emotional harm that burden entire communities, and drives a wedge between officers and the people they are sworn to serve and protect.

Mental illness, substance abuse, homelessness, and poverty are frequently the subtexts of encounters with police in which police are the default first responders to social issues that they are neither trained nor equipped to properly handle.

To chart a new course in American policing, police should use arrest sparingly, intentionally, and transparently.

RESOURCE SITE

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

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