Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

https://www.vera.org/blog/ferguson-trust-and-the-new-suburbia

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

At a distance of nearly a month, the shooting death of Michael Brown by police in Ferguson, Missouri, the deeply troubling response to it, and the ongoing commentary have a certain back-to-the-future quality, reminding us of how stuck in the past we still are, despite real progress in matters of race. Much remains to be doneand not only in Fergusonto combat the source of distrust and enmity between police and community, particularly African American communities.

There is a depressing sense that not only did we travel down this road decades ago through Newark, Los Angeles, and Cincinnatibut we have learned little, and changed less. The history of racial oppression in America is profound and not easily cast aside. The pressures on law enforcement to maintain record low crime rates encourage the use of tactics that simply exacerbate that historys unhealed wounds, with the unintended, but hardly unforeseeable, consequence of solidifying and entrenching the resentment felt by over-policed communities. (It is worth noting that Ferguson had thehighest rate of arrest warrantsissued for communities its size in Missouri.)

Social science supports this. Research conducted by the Vera Institute of Justice into the impact ofNYC's stop and frisk practicesshowed that being stopped and frisked increased the unlikelihood that the mostly young people of color who were stopped would call the police even if they were a victim of violent crime. In that circumstance, everyone loses. Overly aggressive practices by the police rob them of the cooperation of victims and witnesses needed to solve crimes. And the community who relies upon the police for safety is deprived of protection.

All that is reasonably clear, even if it is still debated in some circles. But there are two aspects to the Ferguson story that are newer, under-reported, and of equal concern. One relates to daily practices of municipal government. The other to long-term demographic shifts already well underway in this country and sure to continue for the coming decades.

The first is the role of the imposition of fees and fines in Ferguson to support not only law enforcement but municipal government itself. While criminal justice reformers, particularly conservatives, rightly bemoan the inordinate amounts of money spent on incarceration in the name of public safety (with poor ROI), little attention is paid to the pernicious ways many local governments have chosen to deal with budget constraints.Reportingfrom Ferguson has shown that the town has relied heavily onfees and finesto fuel itself (fees and fines are the second highest source of revenue), as more traditional forms of funding, such as state aid and tax revenues, have been cut or reduced. The result: poor and struggling peopleblack and whitetrapped in a web of increasing and unnecessary criminal justice contact. Fees and fines are myriad. Inability to pay fines leads to warrants, arrests, and days spent in jail. And even a record of an arrest, no less a conviction, for a minor offense can cause majorcollateral consequences, making finding and keeping a job or accessing needed public benefits difficult and often impossible.

Ferguson is, of course,not alonein this approach and at the very least the practices exposed there should spur a new and serious look at the damaging consequences thatfees and finehave on poor people. Of all races.

Second, Fergusonespecially in terms of the incapacity of its police department to engender a relationship of trust with the majority minority community it servesmay be a harbinger of things to come. Little noticed in many circles (but thoughtfully detailed byAlan BerubeandElizabeth Kneeboneof Brookings), suburban America is changing. Demographically. Rapidly.

In 2008, we marked the first year in which suburban poverty exceeded that in core cities. That trend persists and the gap is widening. Similarly, many suburbs are becoming more diverse ethnically and racially. Some, like Ferguson, are inner ring suburbs with high proportions of African Americans. Others, such as those in Southern King County outside Seattle or in Gwinnett County in Georgia, are veritable stewpots of ethnicities, with scores of languages spoken.

The challenges for law enforcement are clear and reflected in Ferguson, a community that is two-thirds African American but where only 3 of its 53 officers are. How does a police force, organized around policing suburbs that a decade or two ago were largely homogeneous, effectively build cooperative relationships and mutual trust with the far more diverse communities they are sworn to protect today? From Ferguson we certainly know what NOT to do. And now that the U.S. Department of Justice has opened a full pattern and practiceinvestigation, we are sure to learn even more.

Important academic and practicalworkhas been done on the importance of lawfulness and legitimacy in establishing trust. We can learn from places like Hennepin County, Minnesota where the police departments for Brooklyn Center and Brooklyn Park, which are adjacent municipalities in the northern suburbs of Minneapolis, are building and strengthening foundations of trust between police and newly diverse communities.These effortsinclude a police-community multicultural advisory council, new American citizens police academy, multicultural community service officer cadet programs, and officer access to and training on interpreter resources. Taking such steps will go a long way to not only forestalling the conflagration that Michael Brown's death turned into, but also cultivating a relationship grounded in mutual respectbetween police and community that can endure such difficult moments.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.