

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Policy Issue Resources

Publication

Millions of medically vulnerable and socially marginalized people cycle through the criminal justice system each year due to serious structural problems entrenched in American society. The absence of a coherent and effective social safety net means that people lack access to physical and mental health care, social services, and housing options in their communities. This report details the cultural divide among system actors that amplify and sustain these problems and offers recommendations on how law enforcement policymakers and practitioners in collaboration with public health officials and harm reduction advocates (who use a range of strategies to reduce the harmful consequences of risky behavior, particularly drug use) can enhance both public safety and community health.

By working with public health stakeholders, police can improve how they respond to people living with substance use and mental health needs by incorporating principles of health promotion and harm reduction into their mission, as a means to improve community health while protecting public safety.

Against the backdrop of the largest expansion of the criminal justice system in U.S. history, police officers have found themselves routinely serving as de-facto street corner psychiatrists and frontline mental health workers.

Fear of arrest and incarceration can deter people with drug addictions from seeking treatment. Untreated addictions can lead to poor health, resulting in the spread of infectious disease within a community.

Successful partnerships between police and harm reduction programs for example the LEAD (Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion) program show how these two groups can work together to prevent the spread of disease and the over-incarceration of vulnerable communities.

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