

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/covid-19-1/law-enforcement-best-practices-can-help-halt-the-spread-of-covid-19-by-keeping-people-out-of-jail>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Coronavirus, or COVID-19, hit American correctional facilities this week. Two of the largest jails in the country, [Rikers Island](#) in New York City and [Cook County Jail](#) in Chicago, have multiple confirmed cases.

The more than [3,000 jails](#) in the United States provide ideal conditions for the transmission of coronavirus because of the constant churn of new admissions, overcrowding, inadequate health care, and the frequent lack of access to hand sanitizer or soap and water. Incarcerated people are especially vulnerable because the elevated rate of serious [health conditions](#) among those in jail places many in the high-risk population for COVID-19.

Keeping people out of jail and prison must be a priority at this moment, and the approximately 18,000 police agencies in America represent incarcerations front door. Law enforcement agencies made more than 10 million [arrests](#) in 2016, the last year the FBI published Uniform Crime Reporting data, and for every 100 arrests [there were](#) 99 jail admissions. The priorities communicated by police chiefs and sheriffs play a [critical role](#) in determining the size of jail populations nationwide. Reducing policings footprint, particularly by [curtailing](#) the mass enforcement of low-level offenses, is crucial to minimizing the spread of COVID-19 in correctional facilities.

When American citizens interact with the police, it is usually their first point of contact with the justice system. Policing, therefore, [could become](#) a significant vector of transmission if agencies do not adopt appropriate public health practices. Coronavirus has also presented a fundamental challenge to policing as thousands of officers [call in sick](#), training academies [close](#), agencies [wrestle](#) with whether to enforce coronavirus stay at home rules, and 911 dispatching systems are [overburdened](#).

On March 18, Vera and [Community Oriented Correctional Health Services](#) (COCHS) published a [guidance brief](#) identifying preventive and responsive measures that state and local law enforcement can take to contain coronavirus. The policy recommendations include prioritizing prevention by, for example, equipping 911 call-takers and dispatchers to divert more calls-for-service to health resources; issuing a temporary directive to release people on a citation, ticket, or summons in lieu of taking them into custody in appropriate cases; and suspending standard protocols that place people in custody, such as bench and arrest warrants and technical violations of parole and probation.

Vera and COCHS also recommend social distancing actions, such as using a CDC-informed screening tool for anyone who is brought to or from a police station; deploying or expanding online and telephone reporting options for complaints or police reports; and limiting the number of officers who have contact with visitors to the police department and minimizing contact between officers by suspending roll call.

A few jurisdictions, including several of the largest police forces in the country, have already adopted some of these best practices. These departments provide examples for law enforcement agencies nationwide.

Some jurisdictions are taking steps to **change enforcement patterns**.

Other jurisdictions have adopted practices that alter how **911 and other dispatching systems** are used and operate.

And several departments have implemented **health and safety practices** to protect law enforcement staff and the people who interact with them.

These practices all further the goal of keeping police and the communities they serve safe by reducing entanglement with the criminal justice system to protect public health. More agencies should follow suit.

Find a complete list of the recommendations from Vera and COCHS [here](#).

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