

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/breaking-point/the-role-of-research-in-filling-system-gaps>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

[WNYS Breaking Point series](#) highlights shortcomings in New York City's economic, mental health, and criminal justice systems and the ways that current programs and structures are failing the people they are designed to serve. But there are substantial efforts underway in the city to better understand and effectively address these problems and to comprehensively address mental health needs, all with the broader goal of interrupting the cycle of poverty, mental illness, and justice involvement.

These efforts include \$130 million in dedicated funds to fill gaps identified by [a mayoral task force](#) in how mental health needs are addressed within the criminal justice system, as well as the [creation of a road map](#) of mental health services and policies across the city. As promising as they are, however, the establishment and enactment of an ambitious research agenda to evaluate their effectiveness is essential to their long-term success.

Reliable and accurate data are necessary to examine whether and how well these initiatives work, establish an evidence base to offer guidance to other jurisdictions considering similar actions, and generate local and national support for the efforts. The challenges of this research are many, particularly in working across numerous city agencies and partners to establish common measures and methods for collecting data. Yet such research is crucial to validating the success of these efforts. Assessments of the costs and benefits are important as well.

The task force's strategy and the framework for the corresponding road map are based upon expertise and evidence and draw upon the most recent research on best practices. But we will need to know more as new policies are put into place. For example, the city will expand training for first responders so that they are better able to recognize behaviors and symptoms of mental illness and substance use when they encounter it. Monitoring and evaluation are critical to determining which components of the training are effective and where further work is required.

As is often the case in policy reform, many of the mental health initiatives will address some needs, but in doing so, identify additional gaps. Part of the task force's initiative involves enrolling justice-involved individuals in Medicaid, which will provide this disadvantaged population with health insurance, including mental health coverage. However, many of these individuals live in some of the most poorly-served neighborhoods of the city where the availability of behavioral health services is likely to fall well short of demand. Research can play a critical role in identifying and measuring these gaps, thereby contributing to citywide efforts to better match need and services.

To take another example, [Vera's recent report](#) on the 2009 New York State drug law reforms found that changes in the law led to an increase in the number of eligible defendants who were diverted to treatment; however, only slightly more than 20 percent of those eligible were diverted, falling far short of the interventions' potential benefit. A fuller evidence-based understanding of the reasons why can contribute to increased use of this potentially beneficial practice.

Research and evaluation is essential to understanding whether new policies and programs are achieving their aims. This knowledge is essential to shaping efforts designed to serve the mental health needs of New Yorkers and to take the lessons learned from the city's experience to improve mental health services nationwide.

Vera is pleased to complement the WNYC broadcast, *Breaking Point: New York's Mental Health Crisis*, with [a blog series](#) that features the voices of experts from a range of fields as they examine how the nexus of poverty, mental health, and the criminal justice system affects nearly every aspect of New York City life.

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