

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/annual-report-2019-a-vision-for-change/promoting-safety-trust-and-justice-in-a-more-diverse-america>

Annual reports

A black box. For far too long, prosecutors have exercised power in ways that have fueled mass incarceration and racial injustice. This historic overreliance on locking people up, rather than addressing their underlying issues, has not made us safer. And it has brought disproportionate harm to the most vulnerable members of our communities—people who are poor (especially people of color) and those with histories of substance use or mental health issues, as well as their families and communities.

The good news is that these issues are rising to the forefront, as communities demand a new approach to justice through the election of reform-minded prosecutors in high-profile races across the country. To support this growing movement for change, Vera's Reshaping Prosecution program is equipping prosecutors with the tools that they need to deliver on their campaign promises to end mass incarceration, reduce racial disparities, and increase transparency and accountability to the communities they serve. We are using in-depth analysis and training to inform prosecutors' decision making, measure progress, and fuel transformation in culture and practice within prosecutors' offices at all levels, from the executive office to frontline staff.

Vera also connects with community leaders and organizers—many of the people who have helped to elect reform-minded prosecutors—to help each prosecutors' office shape top priorities for reform. We are already working with offices in Burlington, Vermont; Contra Costa County, California; Kansas City, Kansas; and St. Louis, Missouri, and we are expanding the program to three additional jurisdictions in early 2020.

Centering racial equity in prosecution. Vera has also partnered with the Institute for Innovation and Prosecution at John Jay College to bring together 25 racial justice scholars, reform-minded prosecutors, and key stakeholders in a new effort called Dignity, Racial Justice, and Prosecution. Together, this group of experts is confronting the ways traditional prosecution dehumanizes people—particularly Black and Latinx people—forging a vision for reform, and formulating a practical plan for prosecutors to uphold human dignity and pursue racial equity. Importantly, their work has been shaped by the expertise of advocates and people impacted by the justice system. By next year, this group will launch a multimedia toolkit of actionable guidance for prosecutors, which Vera will pilot with three partner offices.

Combating attacks against Black women prosecutors. Finally, although most reform-minded prosecutors face opposition from police unions and other stakeholders seeking to maintain the status quo, lead Black women prosecutors implementing change have faced an unprecedented level of racialized and gendered attacks. These have included lawsuits, appointments of special prosecutors, and racialized intimidation—including death threats, use of racist language, and even a noose that was delivered to one prosecutor. This virulent outbreak of intimidation led Vera's team to organize a retreat in August for 12 Black women prosecutors. Designed to create a space for these women to regroup and strategize, the retreat included opportunities for professional support and sessions with experts on navigating hostile political environments. On September 13, Vera convened a meeting of more than 30 leaders to coordinate additional support for the communications, legal, and funding needs of Black women prosecutors. Vera continues to lead this coordinated effort to provide ongoing support.

The desperate situation at our nation's border and in immigrant communities all across America is nothing short of horrific. Detentions, deportations, and family separations happen every single day. Many people are left facing the terrifying prospect of navigating the complexities of immigration law alone, simply because they cannot afford or get access to legal counsel.

However, for Mariana and hundreds of immigrants with similar successful outcomes, an attorney was a crucial last line of defense that enabled them to access their rights, keep themselves safe, and stay with their families and communities. And these success stories are consistent with studies showing that immigrants who have legal counsel are more than 10 times more likely to establish a right to remain in the United States than those who do not. This fact is what drives our efforts to sustain and expand our SAFE Network, a partnership of local governments, legal service providers, and advocates dedicated to defending the rights of immigrants facing detention and deportation in their communities. We share a bold and ambitious goal of achieving universal representation to ensure that everyone at risk of deportation has access to due process and high-quality legal representation, even if they cannot afford an attorney.

Over the last year, as indiscriminate immigration enforcement and inflammatory anti-immigrant rhetoric have continued to escalate, Vera grew the SAFE Network by 50 percent, bringing this work to a total of 18 partner sites across 11 states. This work has helped put the issue of universal representation on the map, and we are now taking full advantage of this unprecedented opportunity to build a national movement to achieve widespread and lasting change. Over the next three years, Vera will expand SAFE to a total of 25 jurisdictions and work with local government partners to expand and sustain public funding for legal representation programs. We will expand our partnerships with national and local advocates in the immigrant rights movement and ramp up our use of polling, media, and social media to support our partners and build broad national public support for reform. Vera is committed to this urgent work over the long term, and our team will not rest until our country has established a system of universal representation that protects the rights of all immigrants facing deportation.

Today, someone is arrested every three seconds, and American policing is at a difficult crossroads. Its overreliance on punitive enforcement and arrest has significantly contributed to mass incarceration, racial inequities, and fractured trust between police and the communities they serve—especially communities of color. To fundamentally reimagine the role of police in our communities, arrests should be monitored carefully and used sparingly, and alternatives must be explored and implemented. To further this end, Vera designed and launched Arrest Trends—an innovative data visualization tool that collates and analyzes key data on various law enforcement-related indicators. Arrest Trends features interactive infographics, charts, and a 50-state map that allow users to explore policing trends over time for a selected agency, county, state, or region and compare those results to other locations or agencies. By making this information accessible to policymakers and the general public, Arrest Trends has begun to generate dialogue about the role of policing and police-community cooperation, underscore how local decisions about enforcement can act as a driver of mass incarceration, and highlight alternatives that might better address the root causes of crime. Arrest Trends is helping fuel our work to transform the culture of policing from one that focuses on punitive enforcement to one that delivers equal justice for all through active community engagement.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.