

# Vera Institute of Justice

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/addressing-racial-disparities-starts-at-home>

### Public Facing Advocacy Writing

"Address racial disparities. Too often, it's the final bulleted recommendation in a report of findings from an effort to reform the criminal justice system.

The recommendation sounds clear, but it is far from simple. And it continues to remain unresolved, becoming merely a boilerplate to-do item for any criminal justice reform effort.

For those who seek to end mass incarceration and advance justice for all members of society—particularly for people of color, who bear the greatest burden of structural and institutional racism—it is imperative to find a tangible way to move beyond that last bullet point.

Structural racism in America's criminal justice system mirrors the structural racism that exists in other systems as well. Reforming the laws, policies, and practices that drive men and women of color into poverty, homelessness, and cycles of addiction—as well as other conditions that contribute to criminal behavior and make people vulnerable to over-policing and over-incarceration—must be a part of any package of systemic reforms intended to reduce or end disparities based on race.

How can America begin to unravel the legacy of racial injustice that has persisted for centuries? We would venture to say that there is no single solution—but that all solutions begin at home. Those of us fighting to end racial disparities in the justice system must first challenge ourselves to understand our race, culture, power, and privilege. Then, we must challenge our own organizations to mirror the values and ideals of racial equity and its intersections with gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and justice involvement, to name a few.

At Vera, we've accepted that challenge. We are taking purposeful action through a multi-year initiative that includes many different trainings and the real-time integration of racial impact assessments into our operations and programmatic work.

One important step is to ensure that people of color hold management positions, including at the executive level. And a single person is not enough—multiple men and women of color (together with their other identities) must be present at any decision-making table. We want to overcome the actual or perceived lack of a pipeline of qualified people of color for such positions. We understand that we do not live in a meritocracy—the playing field is not level. This may require taking steps to remove bias in the hiring process—such as intentionally recruiting from historically Black colleges and universities, stripping demographic characteristics from applications, or taking steps to de-bias the interview process. It may also require articulating a commitment to race equity in the first few sentences of a job posting.

We also need to acknowledge and reflect on history—specifically how the nation's criminal justice system has been used to enforce laws that criminalize race and ethnicity and aim to control the lives of people of color. We aim to be prepared to change the way we've always done things. Tradition does not ensure equity and it often masks baked-in inequity. At the same time, we recognize that everyone has blind spots and that the process of discovery can be uncomfortable.

We should be prepared to rebut common myths about why racial disparities exist, and engage and seek the perspectives of men and women of color who have lived through the experience we are trying to reform in the development of an alternative.

Finally, we have to remember that it's not just criminal justice organizations that struggle to develop solutions that have the potential to achieve true equity. This is something that *any* organization seeking to transform a system confronts, due to a complicated web of structural barriers, as well as our country's legacy of racial injustice.

Addressing racial disparities must become more than a boilerplate bullet point, but to do so requires action, and that action must begin at home.

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