

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/police-perspectives/avoiding-profiling-by-proxy>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

When an individual calls the police and makes false or ill-informed claims of misconduct about persons they dislike or are biased against, e.g., ethnic and religious minorities, youth, homeless people, police must be careful to avoid profiling by proxy.

This problem can arise when police officers rely on the emergency dispatchers recitation of what a biased caller claims to have happened instead of making an independent and professional assessment of the callers claims. Police should professionally and accurately evaluate the facts and risks of each individual case beyond the hearsay of the transmitted complaint. Otherwise, a biased callers original inferences can generate accusatory claims by police and outraged denials of wrongdoing by the accused.

Especially in time-critical situations, this can lead to behavior by all parties that is based on bias-fueled fear and can lead to unjust outcomes. To avoid profiling by proxy situations, officers as well as dispatchers should undergo anti-bias training. For officers, this will help them become aware of a complainants potential biases or motivations. Is the caller reporting actual criminal conduct, or do they just not like members of a certain ethnic group hanging out near the local train station?

Dispatchers, the gatekeepers of law enforcement response, are often excluded from this training. But their need for it is acute, to ensure that deployed officers are not misdirected by inaccurate and dangerous assumptions.

Anti-bias training will also help officers become aware of their own biases. For example, when police receive calls or requests about behavior the complainant may dislike but is not illegal, e.g., two men kissing in a park, too many black teenagers in the subway station, they face two quandaries. First, they must determine whose needs must be satisfied, the caller or the subject of the complaint. Second, police must address their obligation to fix the behavior in question by characterizing it as a problem or characterizing the caller as having a problem.

When an officers perception of inappropriate behavior aligns with the callers, the officer is more likely to meet the needs of the caller, stop the men in the park from kissing, even in the absence of criminal conduct. In these situations, officers are likely to act on their own bias to address the matter or find a pretext to disperse the persons at issue to serve the callers agenda. When an officers perception of behavior differs from that of the caller, however, the officer is more likely to recognize the callers bias and dismiss the complaint.

Profiling by proxy requires vigilance by everyone involved in law enforcement. [Recent research](#) on bias and its effect on decision making has been illuminating and needs to be shared with police officers and the communities they serve. The lessons learned should be a part of the police management discussion when exploring ways in which to connect to communities in a more meaningful way and avoid interactions that disrupt opportunities for developing trust.

The [Police Perspectives: Building Community Trust](#) blog series explores the importance of and provides guidance on how to build and enhance positive relationships between law enforcement agencies and the diverse communities they serve.

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