

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/why-the-time-is-now-for-suburban-justice-reform>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The face of suburban America is changing. Far from the stereotype that comes to mind of predominantly white and wealthy residents, the modern suburb represents a microcosm of the country's increasingly diverse population. Suburbs today serve as mirrors for what the rest of the country will become in the coming decades: a majority-minority nation. This makes them worthy of further attention and exploration, especially when it comes to justice reform.

In 2013, the majority of the country's metropolitan regions saw [faster growth in suburbs than in cities](#), and by 2014, more than half the U.S. population [described where they lived as suburbs](#). This incredible growth of suburban America has led to tectonic demographic shifts in these communities, as well. In many places, the population has flipped from a majority white population to a diverse population whose majority is not white. Historically considered more affluent than urban areas, there are now more poor people living in suburbs than in cities. In addition, between 2000 and 2009, immigrants accounted for nearly 30 percent of population growth in suburbs, and today, suburban communities are home to more than [60 percent of America's immigrants](#).

The diversification of suburban America has posed challenges in many places, and contributed to a growing disconnect between local governments—particularly justice systems—and the communities they serve. We've seen this play out nationally in recent years, most notably in Ferguson, MO, with devastating consequences. While investments have been made to build the capacity of metropolitan justice agencies to serve diverse communities, suburban jurisdictions have been neglected.

A crux of criminal justice reform is the need to increase trust between justice system actors and the community. But to achieve national, comprehensive, and lasting reform, these efforts cannot only happen in big cities. This need was recently highlighted by Vera's Incarceration Trends [data visualization tool](#) and report, which revealed that jail incarceration rates [have risen disproportionately](#) in the country's 1,000 smallest counties, which now hold more people of color behind bars on a given day than NYC and LA.

Building trust between actors on the front end of the justice system—namely, law enforcement and victim service providers—and the communities they serve is essential to cultivating safe and healthy communities. Criminal justice reform must include efforts to build the knowledge base around how law enforcement agencies and victim service providers, working in suburbs that a decade or two ago were largely homogenous, can effectively build cooperative relationships and mutual trust with the far more diverse communities they are sworn to protect today.

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