

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/the-role-of-police-in-suburban-immigrant-integration>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

In 2012, the majority of the countrys metropolitan regions saw [faster growth in suburbs than in cities](#). By 2014, it was estimated that [more than half](#) the U.S. population lives in suburbs. This incredible growth of suburban America has led to tectonic demographic shifts in these communities, which are struggling to keep up with the influx of immigrant populations. In particular, suburban law enforcement agencies have faced challenges with policing communities that a decade or two ago were largely homogenous.

These issues, and many others related to immigrant integration, were discussed recently at Decembers [National Immigrant Integration Conference](#) (NIIC), held in Brooklyn. Every year, NIIC brings together nearly 1,500 immigrant rights advocates, community leaders, researchers, and policymakers from across the country to discuss the most pressing issues surrounding immigrant integration. Veras session, Immigrant Integration in the Suburbs, facilitated by chief of staff Susan Shah, featured three experts who are working with suburban immigrant communities in New York, New Jersey, and Illinois: Carola Bracco, CEO of [Neighbors Link Network](#); Kimberly Krone, Youth Justice Attorney in the Immigrant Rights Program at [American Friends Service Committee](#); and Jose Eduardo Vera, executive director of the [Southwest Suburban Immigrant Project](#).

The experts and a number of members of the audience who represented suburban jurisdictions discussed public safety, infrastructure, health, and school systems in suburbs with growing immigrant populations, as well as challenges and opportunities in these diversifying areas. For example, there are now more poor people living in the suburbs than in cities, although the suburbs were historically considered more affluent than urban areas. 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 Americas immigrants. Indeed, the Latino and Asian population [will triple by 2050](#), leading to an even greater change in demographics.

As Mr. Vera explained, Immigrant communities are increasingly moving away from city and urban centers and into the suburbs for many reasons, including higher cost of living in these areas, safety, and better school districts. Yet, the infrastructure to offer services and resources to immigrant communities often does not exist or is very scarce in suburban communities.

Due to fear of deportation and less awareness of their rights and protections, immigrants in suburbs are often less likely to seek out police assistance, health care, or educational opportunities, on the chance that theyll be questioned about their immigration status. According to Ms. Krone, There is a general fear of government institutions and authority among immigrant communities. If there is a police presence and known cooperation with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE); if there is no language access; if there are requests for documentation, immigrant parents become fearful of approaching the police for assistance, or of participating in their childrens education.

In addition, while language access services, such as interpreters and translated documents, are often lacking in metropolitan areas, these critical resources are even less available in suburban areas, leaving many immigrants unaware of local laws or their legal rights. When translated materials are not available in [an immigrants] language, this can easily cause isolation, Ms. Krone said.

While commercial and residential neighborhoods are often fluid in larger metropolitan areas, and are typically more walkable or offer various public transportation options for commuters, immigrants face difficulties when commuting to and from suburbs for work or school, as well as within suburbs themselves, due to limited transportation options. Transportation is a bigger challenge for immigrants in the suburbs than in larger cities, especially for undocumented immigrants, Ms. Bracco explained. It is harder to access healthcare, harder for children to participate in after school activities, and tougher for workers to piece together several part-time jobs. The limited transportation options in many suburbs cause many immigrant families to become even more isolated from the larger community.

Although the challenges are numerous, immigrant integration in Americas suburbs also offers unique opportunities. Immigration advocates in suburbs often have easier access to local officials, including mayors, councilpersons, or police chiefs. With this access, advocates can more easily lobby for issues most important to immigrant communities in suburbs than they may be able to in more urban areas. Additionally, organizations working on immigrant integration in suburbs often find that recruiting volunteers to assist with their programming and activities is easier in the suburbs than in larger cities; there are often fewer volunteer opportunities and therefore less competing volunteer interests in suburbs, as well as greater community engagement than is commonly found in urban areas.

Immigrant integration is not one sided: it must involve both the immigrant and the receiving community for it to be successful. Strengthening police-immigrant relations in the suburbs is critical, as the fear of law enforcement often prevents immigrants from seeking out the vital community and social services they need. Law enforcement plays an essential role in immigrant integration; along with schools, hospitals and community members, police officials must work to build trust with immigrants in order to ensure safer and more cooperative communities.

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