

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/two-societies/50-years-of-police-militarization-against-communities-of-color>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Police practices topped the list of deeply held grievances named by the individuals and communities interviewed to compile the data for the landmark [Kerner Commission Report](#), published in 1968. After protests erupted in 1967 across the country in communities of color, the commission noted that, in several cities, the principal official response has been to train and equip the police with more sophisticated weapons.

In other words, the action taken by local governments and police departments following public demonstrations was not to try to understand the underlying concerns of residents who were rioting. This approach could have led to societal healing and a prevention of future riots. Instead, the states response was limited to militarizing local police in order to better control the next now inevitable riot.

The Kerner Commission asserted that the act of militarizing local police against communities of color would only lead to incalculably harmful results. Condemning the practice of arming police officers with mass destruction weapons, the Kerner Commission Report concluded that [w]eapons which are designed to destroy, not to control, have no place in densely populated urban communities.

The United States arguably experienced a repeat of 1967's Long, Hot Summer in 2014 after the Black Lives Matter movement drew national attention to police killings of unarmed black Americans, including Michael Brown, Ezell Ford, Eric Garner, Akai Gurley, Laquan McDonald, Tamir Rice, and Yvette Smith each killed in 2014. The press [reported](#) that on the second day of protests in Ferguson, MO, after Michael Brown's death, police arrived in armored vehicles while wearing camouflage, bullet-proof vests, gas masks, and brandishing military-grade rifles.

We are equipping police with military artillery, even 50 years after the Kerner Commission urged the development of guidelines to provide alternatives to the use of lethal weapons in our communities. The Kerner Commission pleaded for further research on this issue. That research is now available, confirming their original suppositions. Using data from several states, [researchers](#) from Harvard, Stanford, and other universities concluded in 2017 that allowing local law enforcement agencies access to military-style weapons has the net effect of increasing violence, not of decreasing or preventing it.

Recent strides were made under President Obama to restrict municipalities from acquiring military weapons from the Department of Defense through the 1033 program; however, those restrictions were [withdrawn](#) in August 2017. With little progress over the decades, and the active overturning of scant achievements, we are fulfilling the prophecy made by the Kerner Commission, still living in the same moving picture re-shown over and over again, the same analysis, the same recommendations, and the same inaction.

One step that we are making at Vera to improve American policing is our partnership with the [Police Foundation](#) to develop Compstat360 over the last few years. Compstat360's [website](#) launched in March 2018 and the programs newly developed model is now being piloted. Vera's role with Compstat360 is to provide training and technical assistance to municipalities who wish to take advantage of this revolutionary police performance management tool, effectively tracking the volume of reported crime, police responses to reported crime, community satisfaction with police responses, underlying causes of public safety problems, and many other important metrics.

The goal of this data collection is to give communities a meaningful voice to help shape policing practices. Successful community policing will improve trust of police, community safety, and effective law enforcement. Through Compstat360, the Vera Institute of Justice is transforming policing by working within the system to effect positive, meaningful change, especially for communities of color. [Rebecca Neusteter](#), director of Vera's Policing Program, [identified](#) that, longstanding fractured relationships between police and many communities particularly communities of color and an overreliance on punitive enforcement, especially for minor transgressions, has resulted in a recurring adversarial dynamic.

We aim to disrupt this tension by amplifying community concerns. Vera's Policing Program envisions Compstat360 as a tool that will help shift policing culture to be one that delivers and rewards public safety through community engagement and satisfaction. The riotous unrest of 1967 that culminated in the Kerner Commission Report calls for just such a revolution. Vera is committed to making the commission's goals of safe, peaceful communities and appropriate policing a reality.

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