

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/my-brothers-keeper/the-future-of-community-policing>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The release of the My Brother's Keeper (MBK) Task Force Report to the President provides an impressive agenda for improving outcomes for boys and men of color. One of the recommendations discusses deepening the practice of community policing in the field, grounded in community-based partnerships and problem solving. Another seeks to lessen racial and ethnic bias in juvenile and criminal justice systems by establishing a national center that will host a powerful combination of research, training, and public discourse on procedural justice, implicit bias, and racial reconciliation.

The national enthusiasm and momentum on this important topic should not end there. Among justice practitioners, particularly police, there is a growing appetite and desire to talk more about race and how to build trust with communities of color. I recently led two discussions with executives and mid-rank officers from jurisdictions around the Washington, DC area on the topic of police connecting with communities of color as part of a [Vera project](#) funded by the [Office of Community Oriented Policing Services](#) (COPS Office) of the U.S. Department of Justice. One resounding theme was present in both groups' discussions: there is not enough open, honest, and yes, at times uncomfortable, dialogue among police personnel about how racism plays out within an agency and how an agency deals with its diverse communities.

The officers noted that the problem is often more complicated than overt racism, though unfortunately, sometimes this is what it is. Other times, police practices are carried out without any knowledge (or acknowledgement) of the deeply rooted mistrust in police that exists among many African Americans, due to decades upon decades of unjust treatment and biased policing. Many of the chiefs complained of this knowledge gap between new recruits and agency leadership. One former police chief and law enforcement expert with 38 years of experience spoke of this country's vagrancy laws, which allowed police to arrest people—particularly those freed from enslavement—who were suspected of a crime but had not in fact committed one. These laws were widespread and used against black Americans until the 1960s, when they were found to be unconstitutional. Yet, they are being forgotten in the policing profession.

Regarding how race plays out inside police organizations, the mid-rank officers noted that even today, within many police agencies, officers of color encounter disproportionate barriers to advancement, particularly with getting into specialty units (e.g., canine units, SWAT, bicycle patrol, and others).

With the national MBK initiative and other complementary national initiatives, we now have an opportunity to have more honest conversations among justice professionals about racial and ethnic justice. Together, there is a possibility of understanding the root causes (not just the symptoms) of community mistrust of police. After all, as the first contact for many who enter the justice system, the initial interaction with police is critical. The trust can either be strengthened or further decimated.

And when it comes to conversations with police, they need to go beyond the executive level. They must involve sergeants and lieutenants—these are the folks who run police departments. They train new recruits and are best suited to cultivate partnerships and problem-solving collaborations with community members. The mentality and policing approach of a field training officer/sergeant often casts an indelible imprint on a new patrol officer hitting the streets. If the sergeant chooses a knock-down-the-door, hard policing approach, this is what the next generation of patrol officers will adopt and embody. Lieutenants, sergeants, and even patrol officers need to be involved in these conversations about how to improve outcomes for young men (and women) of color and keep them out of the justice system. These folks need to be a part of the law enforcement solution. And police departments do not have to do it alone. As the MBK report highlights, the solutions lie in collaborations between the justice system, education system, health system, and workforce.

The agenda laid out by the Obama administration is promising and it offers an opportunity to do more, talk more, listen more, and grow in positive directions.

Vera's [My Brothers Keeper](#) blog series provides insights from Vera staff and other experts on the recommendations President Obama's task force released in 2014, as part of a [progress report](#) on the My Brothers Keeper initiative. We invite your comments.

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