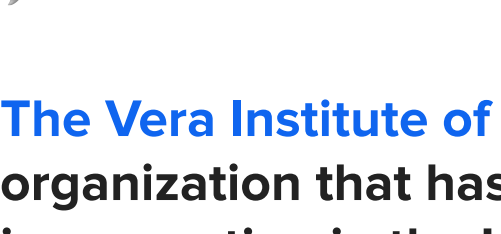


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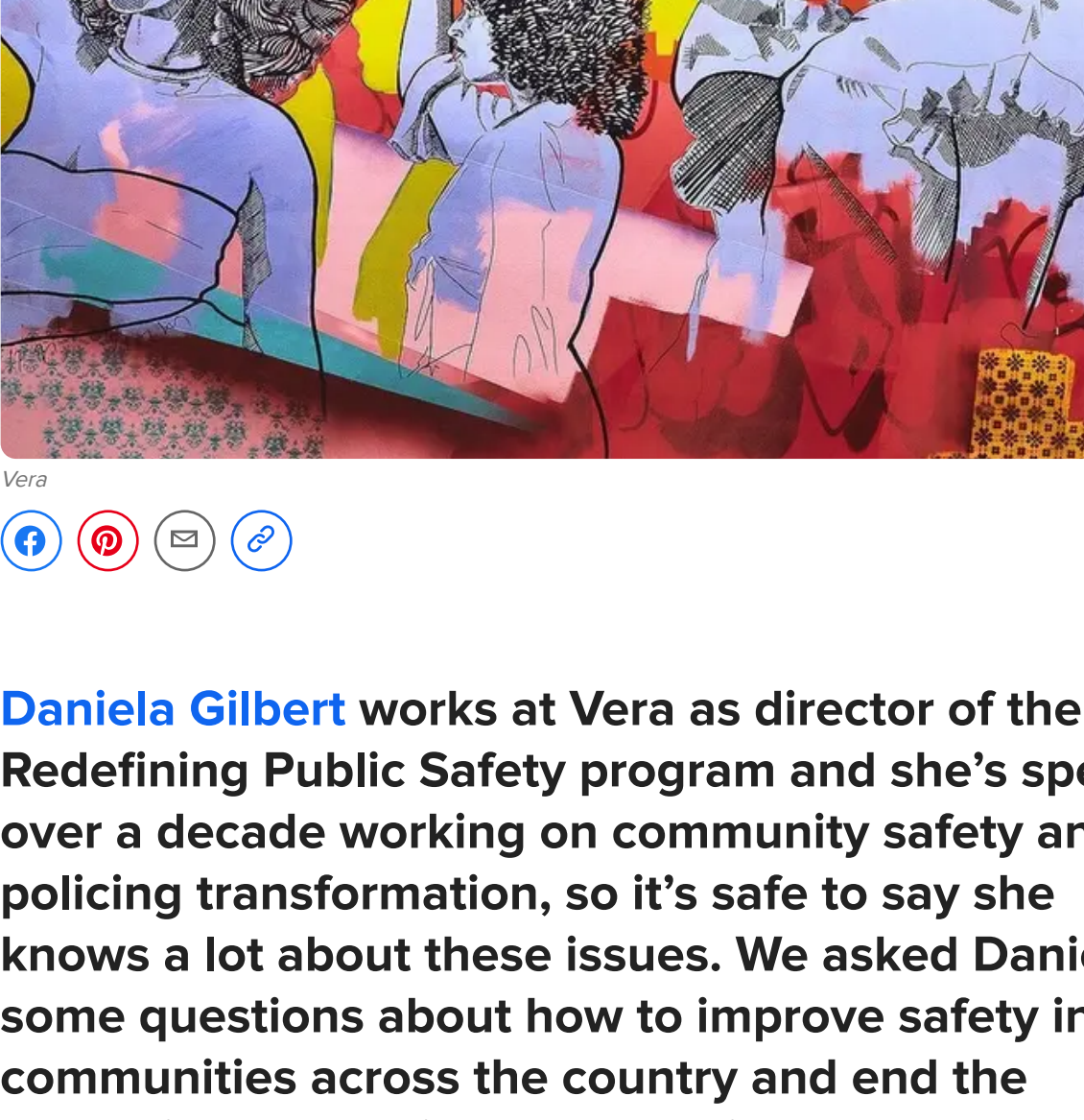
How Do We Reduce Crime? Just Ask This Public Safety Expert

Daniela Gilbert, a director at the Vera Institute of Justice, explains why redefining public safety in the United States is a necessary step toward reducing crime and ending mass incarceration.



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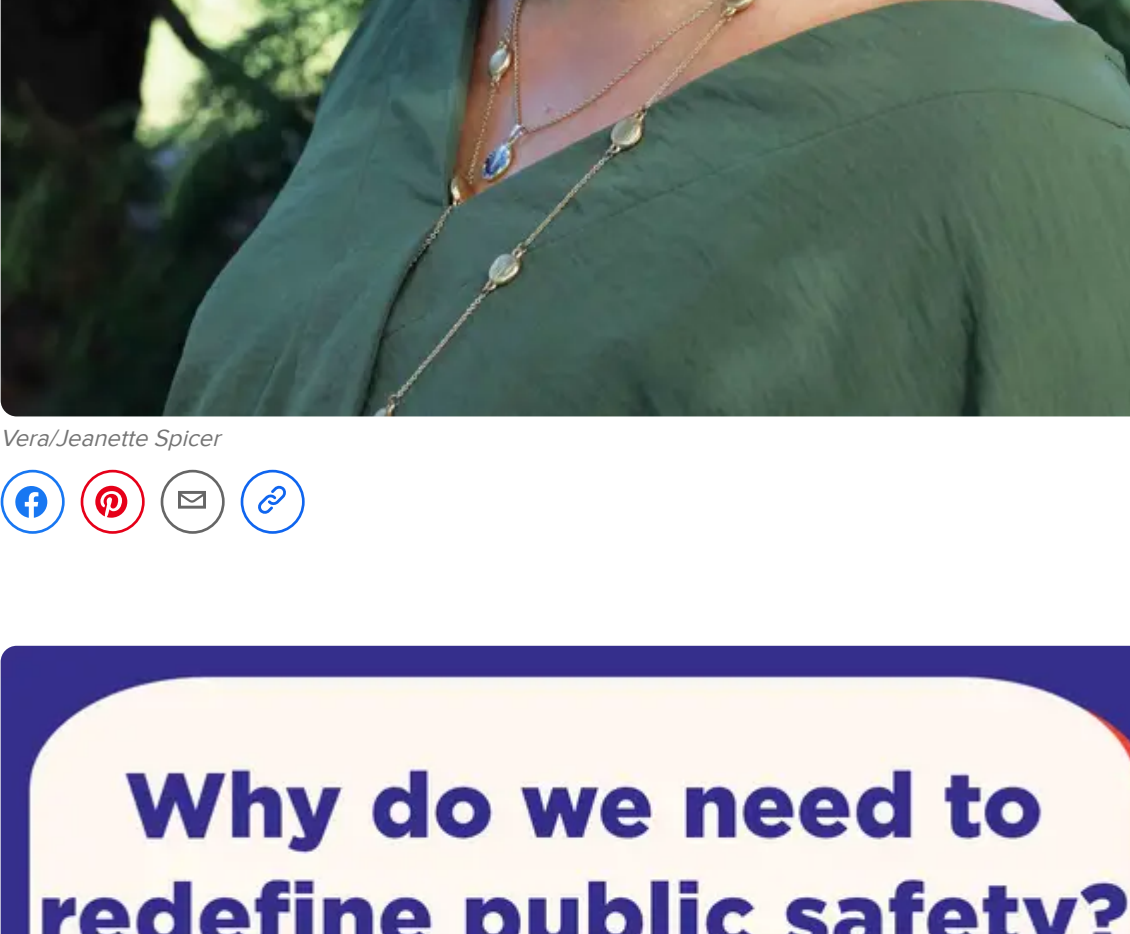
The Vera Institute of Justice is a nonprofit organization that has been fighting to end mass incarceration in the United States for over 60 years. It's powered by researchers and advocates working to transform the criminal, legal, and immigration systems across the country through the development of just, anti-racist solutions.



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Daniela Gilbert works at Vera as director of the Redefining Public Safety program and she's spent over a decade working on community safety and policing transformation, so it's safe to say she knows a lot about these issues. We asked Daniela some questions about how to improve safety in communities across the country and end the overreliance on prisons and police.



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Why do we need to redefine public safety?

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Daniela: People don't feel safe and the solutions they are given repeatedly are that we need more police and prisons to be safe. **But in many situations, policing does not make people safe and people leaving prison are worse off than when they entered.** Every day there are families that must make tough decisions. For instance, their child is having a mental health crisis and if they call 911, in most communities, an armed police officer is going to show up — but we have seen repeatedly how things can go wrong when this happens. Imagine how they would feel about calling for help if, instead, the person who arrives is someone trained to respond to a mental health crisis.

How can we feel safe when most of our current system is reactive? Police arrive most times after an incident has occurred or during a crisis that began well before their arrival. So if we're going to think about what it means to be safe, we need to start earlier. If someone is having a mental health crisis, why are they having one? If someone is stealing, why are they stealing? And so on. **If we can support people before they get to their breaking point, then communities will be safer.** I think that requires a rethinking of where we are putting our resources and how our current system is serving us, because in many instances it's really making things worse.

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Daniela: Policymakers often think the most effective solution to crime is to put more police on the streets. But the evidence on the effect that hiring more police officers has on crime is mixed, and it's clear that what police do is more important than just hiring them. **More policing is a short-term approach that doesn't address the underlying structural causes of crime and it comes with significant social costs for communities.** We know that [interventions](#) like street lighting, cognitive behavioral therapy, and summer jobs programs can lead to immediate and substantial reductions in crime without the negative consequences of policing.

When people have access to opportunities and resources they need to thrive, they are much less likely to cause harm to others. **We have dramatically underinvested in opportunities that are outside of the criminal legal system, but we know it can have a real impact on tackling violent crime.** We should turn first to the solutions we know can work when thinking about what the most effective response to safety concerns might be.

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Daniela: There's this tendency to oversimplify the impact of policing — when people talk about public safety, they talk about policing. Yet research consistently shows that **policing can harm the health, educational development, economic well-being, and civic and social engagement of individuals, families, and neighborhoods.** And these collateral consequences are not just tied to killings by police or arrests leading to convictions. The mere presence of police conducting stops or interacting with residents can have ripple effects across a community and over time.

Being arrested but not convicted can cause significant harm — people lose wages, their jobs, must bear the burden of paying for childcare, and can be traumatized even without any additional involvement in the criminal legal system. The social costs of policing also disproportionately impact Black communities and other communities of color. Several studies have demonstrated that **Black communities are least likely to see the potential crime reduction benefits of more policing but most likely to suffer these negative social harms.**

So whenever there is a choice about policing, communities should ask what are the costs, and how else might we address the problems we are seeing?

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Daniela: There are so many areas where we can rethink who should be responding. The two ways that people typically interact with police are as the result of a 911 call when they are in crisis, or when they get pulled over for a traffic safety violation. **Vera's 911 research has found that in many places a very small portion of 911 calls involve a violent incident in progress.** Policing should focus on responding to these violent incidents and civilian responses should be developed for the large majority of 911 calls that are not related to serious crime. **Cities and counties, as well as state and federal actors, should invest in unarmed, civilian first responder programs to help people experiencing behavioral health crises, homelessness, and substance use issues.**

Many cities are also [rethinking their approach](#) to traffic enforcement and road safety. We've seen police use minor traffic violations to initiate discretionary stops that have little to do with improving road safety and instead perpetuate stark racial disparities. These stops notoriously harm and kill Black people and other people of color — like Tyre Nichols, Sandra Bland, Philando Castle, Daunte Wright, and unfortunately many others. Jurisdictions need to limit traffic stops for minor violations that do not affect public safety and follow best practices to improve road safety and reduce racial disparities in policing. Backed by the evidence, cities from Philadelphia to Berkeley and states from Virginia to Oregon have enacted policies that remove police from enforcement of some or all minor traffic violations. **Do you want to fix our underinvestment in public health and human services? Add your name!**

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Daniela: One is the opportunity to think about equity as new public safety programs and systems get built. Just because alternative responses will provide better solutions to some of these safety issues doesn't mean they will serve everyone equally well or reduce the racial disparities that we see in the criminal legal system entirely. **So we've been intentional about foregrounding anti-racism and equity as programs are designed and implemented.** We developed concrete recommendations in our toolkit [Civilian Crisis Response: A Toolkit for Equitable Alternatives to Policing](#) that we think can be applied widely.

In the past two years, Vera has worked with several prosecutors' offices to implement policies to reduce disparities in traffic stops. Our partnership with Ramsey County Attorney John Choi in Minnesota resulted in police support for limiting traffic stops and a voucher program so that residents could get repairs for their vehicles. Building off that work, we recently began a campaign to help communities pass legislation to end or limit their use of police stops for minor violations like expired tags or a dangling air freshener. We're currently working with advocates or representatives from Montgomery County, Maryland; Memphis, Tennessee; and the state of Washington, **and if other communities are interested, this is your opportunity to reach out so we can help.**

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Daniela: Most decisions about public safety get made at the local level, so change really needs to come locally as well. The federal government has a limited ability to reform law enforcement because police departments and sheriffs' offices are funded, staffed, and overseen by cities and/or counties. **Readers can start by asking questions about the activities of their local police department and how resources are allocated by their elected leaders to make people safer.**

To hold their government officials accountable, it's essential that people have access to data, like how many and what kind of arrests a department is making. **Using tools like Vera's Police Data Transparency Index, folks can see what policing data cities across the country have released.** If there is a bill or initiative to expand alternative responses in your community, you can also write or call your local representative to show your support.

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Daniela: Everyone deserves to live in a safe community where they can pursue a life of happiness, health, and security. Our existing public safety systems rely far too much on policing to guarantee this possibility. **Policing has a role to play in public safety, but it is only one tool, and a limited one at that.** Policing can destabilize communities by making them less healthy and prosperous and therefore also making them less safe. It can exacerbate racial disparities in our legal system, and it can shake public faith in the ability of the government to protect us all, as the national protest movement in the summer of 2020 demonstrated.

We need to invest in promising solutions that make us safer but do not cause significant harm in communities, particularly among people of color. There's a lot we are still learning about emerging alternative responses across the country, and there isn't one place in the US that we can point to and say, "that's 100% how public safety and policing should look." We need people to stay interested and active in holding their local governments accountable for improving the safety and well-being of everyone.

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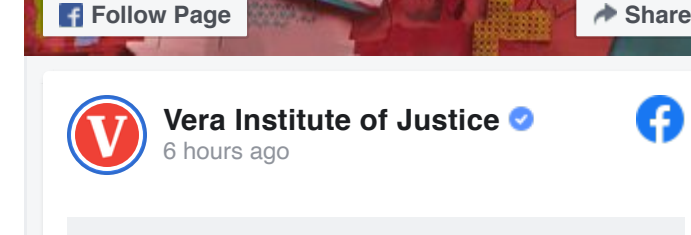
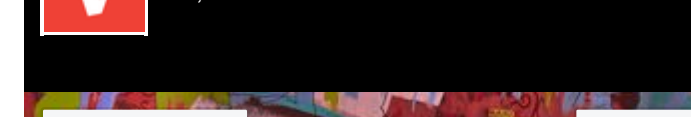
Safety only works if it works for everyone. Mass incarceration hasn't made us safer. Instead, it's led us to many of the problems we have today. Learn more about community safety and get involved in the fight to end mass incarceration and achieve true public safety from the Vera Institute of Justice. Sign up to learn more today.

Responses have been edited for length.

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