

Research Report

Vermont Interfaith Action's Racial Justice/Public Safety Organizing Ministry

April 6, 2022

Vermont Interfaith Action has three broad efforts underway to promote racial justice. Our Public Safety Organizing Ministry started in early 2021 and is pleased to share the results of this work.

The Public Safety group is composed of 8-10 people who represent diverse communities of faith. We approached this project with humility and a spirit of genuine learning both about the experiences of people of color in Vermont and the difficult work performed by police officers. To better understand the issues surrounding policing and people of color in our state, we conducted over a dozen interviews with Vermonters positioned to speak authoritatively on the subject, including:

- The Executive Director of the Windham County NAACP.
- The Executive Director of the Vermont Racial Justice Alliance.
- A member of the Vermont Racial Equity Panel, who is a UVM professor, an expert on policing data, and a member of the Burlington Police Commission.
- The Team Lead of the Burlington Outreach program from Howard Center, a Burlington-based nonprofit that offers mental health, substance use, and developmental disability services.
- Vermont State Police officers, including those responsible for fair and impartial policing, training, and recruitment.
- The Police Chiefs of Burlington, South Burlington, Winooski, and Williston.
- The Commissioner of Vermont's Department of Public Safety.
- The Office of the Defender General representative to the Racial Disparities Advisory Council.
- The Executive Director of the Vermont Criminal Justice Council.
- Vermont state legislators.

Differing views on the issue

One of our chief conclusions is that there is no consensus on the nature or extent of racism in policing in Vermont. Some interviewees – citing traffic stop data and anecdotal reports – believe there is evidence of over-policing of people of color in many jurisdictions. Others pointed to policies and training programs in place to minimize bias. One interviewee noted that violence, arrests, and incarcerations are disproportionately focused on people of color, and that community safety must be viewed as much broader than just policing. Several of the people we interviewed expressed concern about the wide range of policing disparities among Vermont police departments. Some were frustrated by Vermont's limited ability to enforce standards across Vermont's law enforcement organizations, emphasizing that local police

departments think they can police as they see fit and often rebuff attempts by the state to help them improve their performance in this regard.

One law enforcement official stressed that there is explicit bias in policing everywhere, but that it is only occasional – not pervasive – in Vermont. That official took issue with some of the analysis of police stops, arguing that the relatively low number of people of color living in and visiting Vermont means that one incident will dramatically skew the perception of disparity. Another official asserted that there is not much evidence of racism in the daily behavior of police officers, but conceded that racism occurs “upstream” of police interactions – such as in education, housing, and employment.

Ideas to Move Forward

Despite the lack of consensus on racism in policing, interviewees did have useful thoughts and suggestions for Vermonters working to improve policing. A key theme is that trust between the community and the police force is critical for everyone to feel respected and safe. Strong engagement between the police and the community is a starting point to effect change.

The approach: Many believe that reforming public safety is a complex problem that requires careful fact-finding and analysis as well as a collaborative approach between police and the communities they serve. Others noted that quality, reform-minded leadership can make a difference in setting standards, enforcing expectations, and shifting the work culture. The Vermont State Police and South Burlington Police Departments were cited as being ahead of the curve on fair and impartial policing. Both have taken data analysis seriously and made progress in creating a culture that values fair and impartial policing.

Community Oversight: Some argue that police commissions and community oversight are important tools but can be ineffective without appropriate training, mechanisms for promoting communications and trust, and adherence to national best practices. The Burlington Police Commission has taken advantage of The National Association of Civilian Oversight of Law Enforcement (NACOLE) training in this regard. According to NACOLE, effective civilian oversight is an essential practice to develop trust with the community. One senior law enforcement officer, however, pointedly said they do not support community oversight because of concerns about people inexperienced with policing second-guessing the actions of individual officers.

Community Engagement: Many noted the need to strengthen communication and trust between citizens and police departments. Some police officers noted that they receive little feedback from the community – even when they ask. As a result, they are interested in learning more about what Vermonters want and need in terms of policing. Another person noted the importance of transparency, accountability, trust, and cooperation.

Culture: One police chief mentioned the importance of “cultural brokers” to help convey community views to law enforcement and to help the community understand police views. These brokers can help promote open conversations, educate audiences, and bridge cultural differences. This police chief observed that some communities feel that they have an open channel to the police, while others – especially marginalized communities – most likely do not feel that way.

- Many interviewees saw the need for deep cultural change in police departments. One noted that “police deserve respect, as do each one of the people with whom they interact. We need to get past the mindset as the enforcer.”
- Many also emphasized the critical role that leadership plays in changing culture in police departments.
- A leader in the racial justice community noted that faith communities can offer programs to encourage “humanizing the other.”

Data collection, analysis, and use: Many interviewees emphasized that data is important for promoting police transparency and accountability and for keeping the focus on fair and impartial policing. Many assessed that most departments are not using data effectively, in part because of inadequate resources to analyze the data. Some advocated for standardized, state-wide data collection and analysis around characteristics such as race, ethnicity, and other demographics.

- Some believe using data as a police force management tool would be effective, shedding light on officers who are over-stopping and over-searching people.

Policy considerations: One senior official in the criminal justice system thinks that banning pretextual traffic stops would be effective. They perceive the police as having wide latitude to stop people, based on suspicion, which can be skewed as a result of explicit or implicit bias. That official noted Vermont has a very low standard of reasonable suspicion, which could be corrected by:

- Eliminating prosecution of ‘non-criminal’ offenses, such as jaywalking and vehicle tail light violations.
- Strongly emphasizing de-escalation whenever possible during police encounters.
- Having the flexibility to use “declination” when appropriate in the justice system to reduce the chance of racial bias. Declination is a practice of declining to pursue criminal charges, declining to place persons in custody, and declining to impose harsh or impossible conditions.

Education and training: There was broad support for increased training on implicit and explicit biases, data analysis, de-escalation, and safety. Some of our interviewees argued that officers do not generally understand the breadth and depth of racial oppression in the US, while one police chief made this topic central to his officers’ training.

- Many mentioned that funding for such training is inadequate and that time constraints further work against adequate attention to racial issues during training.

Staffing and resource challenges: Police departments are experiencing serious staffing challenges but are committed to hiring qualified applicants from diverse backgrounds.

Social service gaps: Some interviewees noted that policing would be impossible without the support of community groups that help address mental health and substance abuse problems.

- One law enforcement leader would like to see a study that identifies gaps in social services that led to subsequent crisis calls, shining a light on the “upstream” circumstances that led to 911 emergencies.
- Eugene Oregon's CAHOOTS was cited as a national model for embedding experts in mental health, substance abuse, and homelessness with local police.

Organization: Many government officials argued that elevating the Department of Public Safety into an Agency would increase the efficiency and effectiveness of law enforcement in Vermont. Such a change also would provide a mechanism for consolidating police resources regionally and for the state to have greater influence over the policing practices of town and county police officers.

VIA's New Contribution: A Vermont Guide to Community Engagement with Local Police Departments

VIA's research on improving racial equity in policing in Vermont generated a wealth of information and ideas for change. As a next step in this work, we are releasing today a new guide to help communities engage constructively with their local police forces with the goal of reducing racism in policing. The guide, which has been vetted by one of the chiefs of police we interviewed, is designed to give concerned citizens the benefit of VIA's experience in this space and a concrete tool to help them work in concert with law enforcement to produce better outcomes for all. VIA drafted a series of questions in different categories – such as training, accountability, and grievance processes – that community members can use to start a dialogue with their law enforcement officials. We believe that police departments will also benefit from the guide as they seek more constructive interaction with the communities they serve on the question of racism in law enforcement. The guide will be available on VIA's website, and hardcopies are available for those of you present in person this evening.

The guide begins with the case for civilian oversight of law enforcement and an overview of policing in Vermont, followed by the series of questions that are intended to be a first step in opening up dialogue between the police and concerned members of the community they serve. The questions also provide a chance for police officers to talk about policing as a vocation and their motivations for serving. There is also an

opportunity for them to talk about the challenges and trauma they have experienced performing the job and how they handle it. The guide concludes with a section on additional resources, including links to websites.

We encourage all communities in Vermont to initiate such a dialogue with their police departments in a spirit of building trust and coming together to help address a serious and persistent concern that affects the lives of all Vermonters, regardless of race. Vermont Interfaith Action is willing and eager to assist -- coach, support, mentor -- any community group anywhere in the state that would like to use the guide. If a community group uncovers information that is disturbing or at least needs follow-up, VIA leaders are happy to guide them in ways they might do that and resources they could use.