



The Police Data Transparency Index

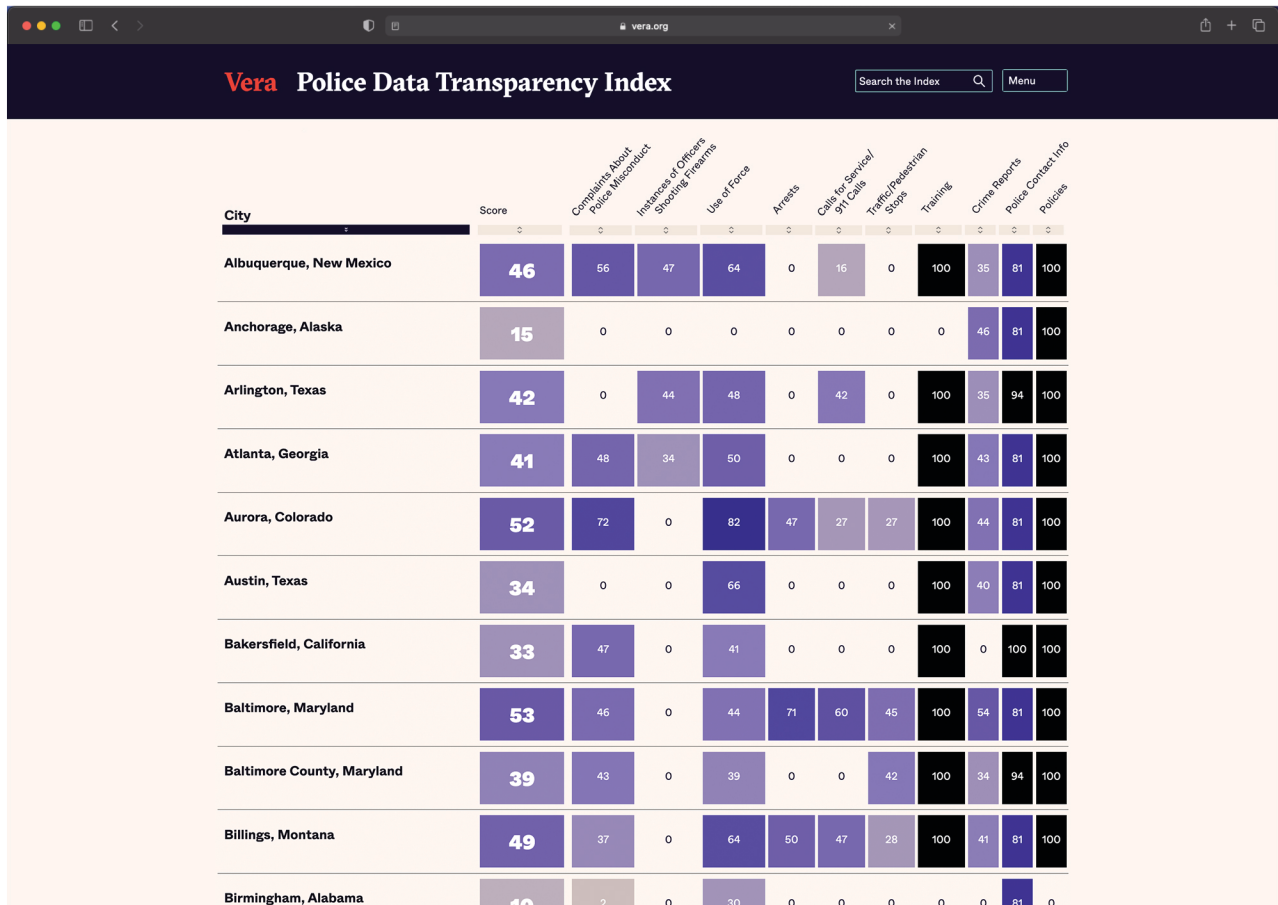
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Vera's new tool provides a community-informed vision of police data transparency for accountability

Police officers are the most visible manifestation of the criminal legal system and have a profound impact on the lives of millions of people every year. The United States's overreliance on policing harms communities of color—particularly Black communities. After the summer 2020 uprisings following the police killings of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and others, many U.S. communities struggled to redefine the role of police. Yet with little access to information about what police do, the public has trouble evaluating and rethinking policing.

Police data transparency standards can address this problem. The Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) has developed a [model of police data transparency](#) in consultation with justice policy advocates, service providers, and people who have experienced the criminal legal system. The tool allows users to see the national landscape of police data transparency and identify data that law enforcement departments should make available to inform public safety system transformation. The site also serves as a directory of links to available data across the United States.



Why is police data transparency important?

Police data transparency allows people to see the police activity happening in their communities and can support efforts to hold law enforcement officers accountable for their actions. Residents, elected officials, practitioners, and journalists can examine information linked in Vera’s Police Data Transparency Index to see what data cities and counties currently make available in order to center racial equity in public safety solutions, identify where police are inappropriately involved in responding to health and social service needs, and ultimately work to end overreliance on policing.

How do we measure police data transparency?

To understand what police data transparency should be, Vera consulted 39 justice policy advocates, service providers, and system-impacted people in 10 places across the United States. Vera also examined literature on best practices in police data transparency and conducted a national review of state transparency statutes and court orders relating to police data reporting.

These activities led to a set of transparency criteria that Vera applied to police data in 94 cities and counties around the country, covering 25 percent of the U.S. population. Each location was scored out of 100 based on the data it makes publicly available. Along with accessibility and usability criteria, described further below, the total score consists of points on three broad categories of data:

1. Police use of physical force or weapons and complaints about police conduct (up to 40 points)
2. Police patrol activities—including responding to calls for service, making arrests, and conducting traffic and pedestrian stops—and police training (up to 40 points)
3. Crime reports, information on how to contact the department, and copies of departmental policies (up to 20 points)

These three categories consist of 10 subtypes of data for an additional layer of specificity alongside the overall level of transparency reflected in the total score for each place.

The number of points a place earns depends on the degree to which its data meets the accessibility and usability criteria. For example, high-scoring cities would have police data sites that provide a user guide and data that is downloadable for independent analysis. Their data would also be regularly updated, detail individual incidents, and include information about the perceived races and ethnicities of the people involved. A complete list of the accessibility and usability criteria with point values can be found in the Methodology section of the site. Providing all data in every category in a manner that meets all of the accessibility and usability criteria would allow a city or county to achieve the maximum score of 100; lower scores reflect lower levels of transparency.

Findings

The Police Data Transparency Index shows multiple ways police data transparency must be improved:

- › Only 23 out of 94 places earned an overall score of 50 or higher, and the highest score achieved was 70, indicating extensive room for improvement.
- › Fifty-eight percent of places Vera reviewed publish no information at all about instances in which officers shoot firearms, despite years of demand for such information and FBI efforts to gather it dating back to 2015. The 42 percent of places that do share data on police shootings earn an average subcategory score of only 55 for this type of data. More situational information about these incidents is needed.
- › Significant gaps exist in transparency about other uses of bodily force or weapons. A full 36 percent of places publish no use-of-force information at all. However, the locations that do make use-of-force data available show that transparency is achievable: Dallas, Texas scored 90 for use-of-force transparency; Aurora, Colorado, scored 82; Indianapolis, Indiana, scored 81. Only 13 percent of cities scored above 70.
- › Significant gaps exist in transparency about police patrol activities. Most places publish no data about arrests (45 percent reporting) or traffic and pedestrian stops (48 percent reporting). Only 61 percent of places report data about requests for police service. As a result, the public has little insight into the work that makes up most police activity.

- › Some locations are making strides in police data transparency. The 10 highest-scoring places all provide at least some data about complaints about police misconduct, non-shooting uses of force, calls for service, traffic and pedestrian stops, training, crime reports, nonemergency department or officer contact information, and departmental policies. All locations provide at least some information about how to contact police, and 95 percent make official police policies available.
- › The simplest way for cities and counties to improve transparency is to provide at least some information for every police data type. Data accessibility and usability are critical, but even supplying basic data for each type of information would improve overall scores significantly. And although only 61 percent of locations provide information about the contents of police trainings, such information likely exists in manuals that could be easily posted online.

Recommendations

1. Local government and law enforcement leaders should actively listen to the needs of system-impacted communities and implement greater local data transparency, especially about cases involving officer-discharged firearms and police patrol activities like arrests, traffic and pedestrian stops, and calls for service. How data is provided should be determined in consultation with community members, especially those impacted by the criminal legal system, to ensure that data is accessible and useful to the people most affected by policing. Providing codebooks to explain data labels and providing incident-level data as opposed to aggregate data are key. Incident-level data that includes demographic information is particularly important to understanding and eliminating racial disparities.
2. Greater transparency about police activities can help communities identify and reduce the use of law enforcement for tasks better handled with a different response. Changes could include the development of [civilian first response teams](#), changes to [traffic stop policies](#), and investments in [community violence interventions](#) and [healing and trauma-informed approaches](#).
3. States can and should establish comprehensive police data transparency among all law enforcement agencies in their borders by requiring publication of police data for the public. One approach would be to use the [Model Data Collection and Transparency statute](#) developed by the [Policing Project](#) as a guide.

For more information

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The Vera Institute of Justice is powered by hundreds of advocates, researchers, and community organizers working to transform the criminal legal and immigration systems until they're fair for all. Founded in 1961 to advocate for alternatives to money bail in New York City, Vera is now a national organization that partners with impacted communities and government leaders for change. We develop just, antiracist solutions so that money doesn't determine freedom; fewer people are in jails, prisons, and immigration detention; and everyone is treated with dignity. Vera's headquarters is in Brooklyn, New York, with offices in Washington, DC, New Orleans, and Los Angeles. For more information, visit vera.org. For more information about this fact sheet, contact Daniel Bodah, senior program associate, Redefining Public Safety, at dbodah@vera.org.