

A Short History of Vera's Work on
Youth Safety and Justice

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Whenever troubled youngsters interact with government systems, there is an opportunity to do things right—to connect with them and offer the guidance and services they need. Justice in these moments is not just a matter of fair treatment, but also of making these connections and helping young people develop healthy and fulfilling lives. By this measure, the criminal and juvenile justice systems, the child welfare system, and the public schools all fall short.

Vera is helping government agencies in all of these systems respond more appropriately and efficiently to young people's individual needs and situations. The Institute has researched the way juvenile courts, detention centers, and other agencies function. These explorations have allowed us to see systems from many perspectives: as a young person, a senior agency official, or a frontline worker. Looking for statistical patterns in an agency's data gives us an even fuller view. These multiple perspectives help us identify gaps in the juvenile justice system and how, with our government partners, we can close them.

Vera creates demonstration projects that not only improve young people's encounters with government, but make the most of these opportunities to offer help. The Institute has pursued its work with youth in three main areas. First, Vera has tried to prevent them from becoming involved with crime and violence, and to encourage their positive development. When kids do get into trouble with the law, Vera has sought to find appropriate responses to delinquency, including alternatives to court and jail. Finally, Vera has researched what causes kids to become involved in delinquent, violent, and criminal behavior.

Keeping kids away from crime and violence

Preventing children from getting involved with violence and encouraging their healthy development are at the heart of one of Vera's newest demonstration projects, Safe and Smart. Vera is working with the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS) and the Board of Education to provide intensive support to foster children in their pre-teen years. Research has shown that early adolescents who have been abused are at greater risk for failure in school and delinquency, and that academic achievement strongly counteracts the disadvantages these children face.

The support is offered within public schools, where children are most easily reached. Beginning in September 1999, Vera placed ACS caseworkers in five Bronx middle schools and helped them take on a new role: that of school specialists. The specialists work closely with students in foster care. Through one-on-one and group sessions, they help children deal with learning problems, depression, and other difficult issues. The specialist also coordinates the efforts of the students' teachers, foster parents, and caseworkers and refers students to needed services. The program's primary goals are to improve students' academic achievement and keep them from becoming involved with violence. However, Vera researchers will also measure whether the program reduces

behavioral problems, improves students' self-esteem, and results in fewer placement transfers within foster care.

Recently, Vera's research department has worked closely with ACS to help the agency learn more about the children in its care and how it can better serve them. To facilitate ACS's own reform agenda, Vera researchers have documented broad changes in the foster care system over time, the use of group care placements, what happens to children who enter care as early adolescents, and the impact of criminal involvement among the biological mothers of foster children. And for the first time, Vera researchers are matching children's foster care and educational records, allowing ACS to track their school performance.

Vera is also working with public schools to directly address school safety. In researching school safety programs across the country, Vera planners realized the importance of coordinating safety geographically. This approach groups high schools together with the middle schools that feed them, and engages key players in the community—school administrators, police, and local business people—in creating a safer area for everyone. Safety is then a communitywide concern, rather than one school's problem. In Brooklyn, Vera is helping community members create an afterschool program in two high schools. The program aims to help adolescents make the often difficult transition to high school, stay in school, and avoid delinquent behavior. The Board of Education and New York City Police Department are partnering with Vera to fund and operate the project.

Vera began work with the Board of Education on school safety in 1998, when our planners restructured the way the board recorded violent incidents in schools. The more precise reporting system Vera developed, which breaks down offenses by severity and type, makes it easier for administrators to see which schools have the most serious safety problems, and allows them to target their responses. Vera is also monitoring the recent transfer of school safety agents from the board to the police department to make certain it is successful.

Another violence prevention effort took place in Family Court. In a recent demonstration project, Vera experimented with intervening at an early stage in juveniles' criminal involvement. In the winter of 1997, Vera briefly ran a special court for juveniles caught for the first time with a weapon. Over four hours, weapons experts, gunshot victims, police officers, and teens who formerly carried weapons talked to young offenders. The goal of the project was to leave kids with an immediate and strong impression about the consequences of weapons, rather than simply process them through the court system.

Responding appropriately to delinquency

When kids do enter the justice system, Vera wants to ensure that they are treated fairly and appropriately. Project Confirm, a Vera demonstration that began in 1998, is preventing

teens in foster care who are arrested from being unnecessarily detained. Prior to the project, arrested foster teens were often held for minor offenses because they had no parent or guardian to claim them. Nonfoster teens arrested for similar crimes were sent home. Vera researchers found that foster kids made up less than two percent of New York City's general population, but 15 percent of its detention population. By the time these kids were released, their placements had often been filled, and ACS had to find them emergency placements. This disrupted children's lives and created extra work for ACS.

In cooperation with New York City's juvenile justice and child welfare agencies, Project Confirm established a system in which police and detention officers call a 24-hour hotline to verify whether a juvenile is in foster care. Confirm staffers then notify the appropriate child welfare agency within ACS to ensure that a caseworker or other responsible adult will appear on the teen's behalf, provide information in court, and take custody if necessary. The project is working. In its first year, Confirm improved the rate at which child welfare representatives appeared in court on behalf of these teens, and achieved the release of almost half of its target population from detention. The project is also maintaining stable foster care placements—most of the kids released in its first year were returned to their original child welfare agency after their brush with the law.

One of Vera's newest efforts is a drug treatment program that will identify adolescents with severe substance abuse problems while they are in detention. The program will begin treating these teens right away, in confinement, and continue treatment after they return home. By making treatment portable, Vera planners hope to provide these teens with the continuous support they need to overcome addiction. The program seeks to address the real problem—heavy drug use—rather than the symptom, which may be stealing or other criminal behavior.

Vera has also experimented with diverting young offenders away from courts and jails when alternatives are more appropriate. Indeed, one of Vera's first demonstration projects was such a program. In 1967 Vera launched the Court Employment Project (CEP), which intervened after arrest but before trial to offer young people counseling, job training, and employment. If the defendants cooperated, their criminal charges were dropped. CEP tried to prevent criminal careers from developing by addressing defendants' personal problems and helping them get good jobs. Program designers hoped CEP would not only conserve court and detention resources, but help people to live more productive lives.

CEP inspired similar programs nationwide. But a Vera evaluation revealed that the program was not achieving what it set out to do. CEP was not diverting cases that were likely to be prosecuted, but enrolling juveniles whose cases, for various reasons, were not destined for prosecution. The program was redesigned, and the new CEP enrolled juveniles convicted of a first serious felony. In 1989 CEP merged with another Vera project to become part of the Center for Alternate Sentencing and Employment Services (CASES), a nonprofit that offers intermediate sentencing options. When young offenders

are sentenced to CASES supervision, they receive the educational assistance and job training they need to continue schooling or enter the job market.

In 1970 Vera began a program with similar goals, the Neighborhood Youth Diversion Program. Aimed at offenders up to age 16 in a predominantly African-American and Latino Bronx neighborhood, the program offered community-based mediation and counseling as an alternative to family court. It sought to keep kids' families together and help them grow in a positive direction. The heart of the initiative was the Youth Forum, where community members volunteered as mediators to resolve conflicts. In six years, the program diverted more than 1,800 juveniles. In 1979, it became an independent nonprofit, Neighborhood Youth and Family Services. Since then, the organization has retained its focus on keeping families together by working to prevent kids' placement in foster care. It offers an array of services to families, such as substance abuse treatment, parenting classes, and legal advocacy.

Understanding youth crime and violence

From its earliest days, Vera has sought to understand the causes of youth violence and delinquency, and this research has continued over the decades. Most recently, in 1995, Vera began a three-year, ethnographic study of how adolescents experience and deal with violence. Vera researchers followed 75 middle-school students in three different New York City neighborhoods to document their everyday encounters with violence. The research looks at how and why kids become involved in violence as perpetrators, victims, and witnesses. The work produced a rare insider's view of how violent encounters develop among adolescents and how they can become full-blown conflicts or be resolved with the help of caring adults. The research suggests that adolescents need their parents, school personnel, and community members to take a more active role in keeping them safe.

As the ethnographic research was getting underway, Vera organized and hosted a residential workshop on adolescent violence in April 1997, bringing together experts from across the United States. Researchers, child welfare administrators, school principals, judges, federal officials, and foundation officers all shared their knowledge about concrete ways to prevent and reduce adolescent violence.

Vera's recent work in this area builds on research done in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1975, at the Ford Foundation's request, Vera began to define and quantify violence among juvenile delinquents. In reviewing the literature, Vera found that scant research and few resources had been devoted to this group. Vera researchers explored the scope of juvenile violence, as well as treatment and prevention alternatives, by analyzing juvenile court records in the New York metropolitan area and by interviewing actors in the justice system—judges, lawyers, prosecutors, psychiatrists, and probation officers. The research concluded that despite the fact that juvenile violence was a serious and growing problem,

“violent or seriously disturbed delinquents...are frequently denied access to effective help.” Training schools and probation, two common responses to violent young offenders at the time, did not provide constructive treatment. The research was published as a book, *Violent Delinquents*.

Vera further explored justice system responses to young offenders in a 1986 report, *Criminal Careers of Juveniles in New York City*. In this research, Vera documented the later criminal careers of a group of 12 to 15-year-olds arrested in 1977 and 1978. The research tested whether arrests at this age were accurate predictors of adult criminal activity, and found that they were not. This finding argued against the notion that the people responsible for the most crimes can be identified early and confined. Not only couldn't researchers predict who would become a high-rate offender, the report found, they also could not account for the fact that most juveniles stop committing crimes.

As part of the effort to understand the roots of crime and violence, Vera has explored the relationship between youth crime and employment. Do young people commit crimes as a source of income? If they had jobs, would they commit fewer crimes? Vera and her researchers evaluated jobs programs that sought to stem crime, and looked at whether more employment would mean less crime. In the early 1980s, Vera set up and oversaw the Alternative Youth Employment Strategies (AYES) program, a demonstration project in three cities that tested whether a jobs program would improve young people's later job market outcomes and lower their chances of becoming involved with crime. The program, which targeted disadvantaged teens, was shown to improve employment but to have no effect on future criminal involvement.

In 1984, Vera and her researchers produced *Employment and Crime: A Summary Report*. This report found that most young people “age out” of criminal behavior as they mature, and that they do not necessarily commit crimes because they cannot secure employment. At the end of the decade, Vera's ethnographic research among young males in New York City was published in 1989 as *Getting Paid: Youth Crime and Work in the Inner City*. The research pointed to two policy implications: improve educational attainment and job prospects for young people in the inner city; and, when seeking to explain their behavior, view them as members of larger social contexts. This study was one of the first to use a comparative, ethnographic approach to understanding crime.

Vera's research showed that the relationship between juvenile crime and unemployment is complicated. A certain amount of criminal involvement may be an act of rebellion for younger adolescents. Further, young people do need jobs in the short term, but more than that, they need long-term investment in their communities. Finally, the AYES project showed that one-time exposure to a jobs program cannot be expected to transform the circumstances that led to a young person's criminal involvement.

Techniques for Innovation

While Vera's government partners want to be more responsive to the children in their care, they also have finite monetary and personnel resources. The innovations Vera builds must work within the constraints of resources and politics, or they will not last. Vera uses several techniques in different combinations to bring about permanent positive change in agencies that deal with young people. We get specific, create new options, provide new information, and build incentives for our partners to use new options or act on new information. Finally, Vera evaluates the innovation's impact. A closer look at a few projects will show how the techniques work.

With the Court Employment Project, Vera presented a new option: prosecutors could divert young offenders to a program that offered job training and counseling, rather than prosecute them in family court. The incentives to use CEP seemed clear. The program promised to conserve prosecution, court, and detention resources. It also aimed to cut short criminal careers, a long-term benefit to society and the criminal justice system. But the incentives for individual prosecutors to use the program as designed proved too remote. A Vera evaluation showed that the program was not diverting juveniles from court: it was enrolling youths who were unlikely to be prosecuted. With this knowledge, Vera redesigned the program to serve more serious young offenders after conviction.

On the Safe and Smart demonstration project, Vera began with an interest in the safety and academic achievement of middle school students in general, but Vera's program planners quickly got specific in identifying a target population for whom they could design a coherent intervention: middle school students in foster care. Then Vera created a new role for ACS caseworkers, that of the school specialist. Through the specialist, the project offers a new option: it makes counseling and support services available to foster children *in schools*. Teachers and school administrators have strong incentives to use the school specialist to relieve the burdens that these children can place on them. The specialist, in turn, provides ACS with up-to-date information about the children the agency is responsible for. Because of Safe and Smart, ACS gains insight into the daily situations of the children in its care—information it may need to avert a crisis.

With Project Confirm, we focused on a specific subgroup of juveniles in detention: foster kids. Confirm staffers provide crucial, previously missing information to players in the juvenile justice system, and to ACS caseworkers, that allows foster kids to be released to responsible adults. Senior officials certainly had incentives to support Project Confirm. The program promises to reduce overcrowding in juvenile detention centers, relieve stress on ACS's emergency placement services, and prevent kids from moving to new placements. But through tight monitoring and an alliance with staff supervisors, Project Confirm also provided incentives to individual caseworkers to appear in court and welcome their children back into foster homes.

Chronology of Vera's Work on Youth Safety and Justice

- 1967 Court Employment Project [spun off in 1989 as part of CASES]
- 1970 Neighborhood Youth Diversion Program [spun off in 1979 as Neighborhood Youth and Family Services]
- 1975 Study of violence among juvenile delinquents [published as *Violent Delinquents* in 1978]
- 1975 Employment and Crime Project [concluded in 1984]
- 1980 Alternative Youth Employment Strategies Project [evaluation completed in 1983]
- 1986 *Criminal Careers of Juveniles in New York City*
- 1989 *Getting Paid: Youth Crime and Work in the Inner City*
- 1995 Ethnographic research on adolescent violence
- 1997 Weapons Court
- 1996 Residential workshop on adolescent violence
- 1998 Project Confirm [continuing]
- 1999 Report to the New York State Governor's Task Force on School Safety
- 1999 Safe and Smart [continuing]
- 2000 Development of School Safety Demonstration Project
- 2000 Development of Portable Drug Treatment Demonstration Project

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Vera’s work with young people—from our early research on violent delinquents to our latest demonstration projects focusing on kids in foster care—has given us valuable knowledge about juveniles themselves, and about the systems that serve them. We hope that this knowledge and experience, together with the relationships we enjoy with officials throughout these systems, puts the Institute in a strong position to improve young people’s encounters with government, and improve these systems.