

Rhode Island Public Health Advocacy



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Police Data and Public Health

Detailed, publicly available police incident data are needed to advocate for police reforms in Rhode Island. Years of disproportionate policing of people of color across the United States¹ has resulted in high amounts of civil unrest throughout the nation. The increased attention to communities impacted by such policing has revealed the need for continued police reforms that are community led. Community-oriented policing (COP; see textbox) has been offered as a solution to these policing disparities. However, without detailed, publicly available data to inform policy makers and community stakeholders, it is difficult to know exactly what reforms are needed.

The U.S. Department of justice defines **community-oriented policing (COP)** as “a philosophy that promotes organizational strategies that support the systematic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques to proactively address the immediate conditions that give rise to public safety issues such as crime, social disorder, and fear of crime”². One key feature of COP is building police and community relationships and a focus on prevention and de-escalation of situations involving the police.

No clear blueprint exists for implementing community policing; recommendations for community policing are often discussed broadly, such as an ethos or general guidelines without specific metrics or implementation steps. In response to the broad interpretation of COP, several organizations nationwide have created toolkits for policies to enhance public safety. For example, community organizations such as the Black Organizing Project in Oakland, CA, have had notable success in shaping public safety policy and community and police interaction. Specifically, the George Floyd Resolution to Eliminate the Oakland Schools Police Department shifted funds previously used for school resource officers, (SROs, law enforcement officers stationed in schools to prevent crime)³ toward student support positions such as school-based social workers,

psychologists, restorative justice practitioners, and mental health specialists⁴. Similar local efforts such as Dignity in Schools⁵ demonstrate how Rhode Island youth of color are impacted by policing in schools.

Another example is the work of DPH Must Divest, a coalition that seeks to remove the presence of the San Francisco Sheriff’s Department from the city’s Department of Public Health (DPH) clinics and San Francisco General Hospital (SFGH). This proposal for alternative ways to improve public safety includes a 1) community safety team, 2) patient advocates, 3) increases in nursing staff, 4) patient support at time of discharge, 5) expansion of BERT de-escalation specialists, and a 6) funded community leadership board⁴.

Here in Rhode Island, the Providence Police Department has taken the initiative to create the Community Relations Bureau⁴ as part of their longstanding efforts to implement community policing principles. Founded in 2017, this initiative has been working to improve the relationship between the greater Providence community and its police force. Examples of specific initiatives include events where local citizens can engage with police in a non-justice context. In addition, the Providence Police Department has maintained accreditation from the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA) since 2017. CALEA is a credentialing authority designed to improve delivery of public safety by overseeing police departments and verifying they are practicing policing best practices⁴. This

accreditation is optional; research suggests that agencies which seek such accreditation are also more receptive to community policing practices⁶.

The COP initiatives taken by the Providence Police Department are important markers of police reform. However, it is unclear how effective such efforts are in improving the quality of policing in communities of color⁷. As such, there is a need for more detailed data collected about police incidents to determine how COP initiatives influence the public and whether the time and money spent are worth the effort. To this end the Community Safety Act (CSA)⁸ was designed to increase availability of policing data and an online portal of police data exists (<https://www.providenceri.gov/police/crime-statistics/>). However, these data are only available for the past 60 days- making it difficult to examine long term trends in policing. Furthermore, these data are difficult to find and are not listed on Providence's Open Data portal (<https://data.providenceri.gov/>). As such it is difficult to determine from such data how policing COP practices may be impacting different communities.



Conclusions

To address the limitations in available data noted above, the Providence Police Department may consider including crime statistics in their open data portal. Facilitating access to such data will make it easier for policymakers to evaluate if and how policing practices vary across the populations served. It would also be helpful for departments to report the number of people who die while in police custody and/or during police interactions. These data are crucial for informing public safety policies that are equitable and effective⁴.

Residents in Rhode Island do not have easy access to long term data on police incidents (e.g., gender and race of suspects). Given this barrier to community oversight, it is difficult to determine trends in Providence policing efforts and their impact on the community. These data are needed to ensure transparency about the how communities are impacted by policing. Positive change is possible when community members partner with police to effect reform through ongoing involvement in policy. The only way for community public safety efforts to hold ground and keep policy makers accountable is with longitudinal data. Efforts are urgently needed to provide community members with detailed data that is easy to access. These data will allow community members to work hand-in-hand with their public safety departments, volunteers, and organizations to set the agenda for police reform.

References

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