HEALTH
EQUITY
COUNCIL
Serving Albuquerque and Bernalillo County

Law Enforcement Violence as a Public Health Crisis

Health Equity Council

Executive statement

Law enforcement violence is a critical public health issue and a key social determinant of health, disproportionally affecting communities of color. We recommend public health centered approaches to stopping and preventing violence.

Background

At the forefront of public health work are discussions of preventable injury, illness, disease and death. Law enforcement violence is a critical public health issue and a social determinant of health that is preventable. Law enforcement violence results in death, physical injury, and mental health distress to the individuals. At the community level, studies show that exposure to law enforcement violence can lead to psychological distress in the community, increased risk for obesity and diabetes, increase in drug-related risks and harms, HIV transmission, non-fatal and fatal overdose, reductions in access to health care services, denial of educational and social growth, depression, community fragmentation, and economic and financial strains. Fear of contact with law enforcement is a major barrier to accessing health and social services for undocumented individuals and their families. Exposure to violence can also lead to further violence by trauma survivors.

Studies show little consistence evidence of law enforcement presence resulting in reduction in substance misuse, crime, especially violent crime, and its adverse impacts on communities. Law enforcement violence disproportionally affects racially minoritized communities, people living in poverty, immigrants, LGBTQIA+, people experiencing houselessness, sex workers, and people who use drugs. Research suggests that a criminal legal system and the violence associated with it reproduce inequities which lead to further violence and adverse health outcomes; and that the system is costly, ineffective and harmful to individual and public health.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Move towards Public Health Centered Approaches
Social Determinants of Health approaches that target structural inequities are proven to reduce community trauma, improve health, increase social and economic equity, and reduce violence.

Recommendation 2: Increase Data Transparency and Research
Invest in and work with public health agencies in reporting law enforcement related deaths, physical and emotional injuries and other individual and community harms.

Recommendation 3: Reallocating Funds
Reallocate funds to community-led solutions that address violence, reduce inequities, promote healing and health, increase economic and educational opportunities, focus on transformative and restorative justice, and other violence intervention and prevention programs. Public health best practice is for the design and implementation of such healing-center and trauma-informed programs to be led by populations most affected by violence.

Recommendation 4: Decriminalization
Decriminalize sex work, substance use and possession, minor traffic violations, houselessness and other activities shaped by the experience of marginalization. Public health research shows improvements in public safety and health outcomes in the decriminalization of all such activities, and the cost savings can be redirected to the health system.

Recommendation 5: Structural Reforms
Consistent with the city's commitment to equity, commit to root cause analysis and structural shifts in policy and funding that ensures the safety and health of the most marginalized.