

To Protect and Serve: New Trends in State-Level Policing Reform, 2015-2016

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Report Summary

The work of law enforcement involves countless low-visibility duties that are often risky, challenging, and dangerous. Over the last three years, however, members of the public have brought increased attention to incidents of police-community conflict, violence, and misconduct, sparked by several high-profile deaths of people of color, many of them unarmed, during seemingly routine police encounters. These incidents—many of which were captured unfiltered on video and widely disseminated—have resulted in scrutiny of police officer behavior and, in particular, have reignited a debate over the extent to which police may use deadly force against civilians.

The ensuing public attention has also signaled a marked erosion in police-community relations and perceptions of police legitimacy and accountability. At the same time, killings of police officers in New York City, Dallas, and Baton Rouge increased concerns about officer safety. To address these issues, localities, states, and the federal government have begun to examine ways to increase public confidence and police safety. In all, 34 states and the District of Columbia enacted at least 79 bills, executive orders, or resolutions in 2015 and 2016 to change some aspect of policing policy or practice—a marked contrast to the relatively few laws related to policing that were passed by states between 2012 and 2014. During the years covered by this report, states enacted legislation to:

- > **improve policing practices:** States introduced enhanced use of force training, imposed certain restrictions on control and restraint tactics such as chokeholds, or convened working groups to investigate the use of lethal force by law enforcement officers. Still other states passed laws that require training for officers in their dealings

with vulnerable people, such as those living with mental illness or dementia. To better ensure that all groups are treated fairly and to minimize the risk of unconstitutional practices, some states also enacted or enhanced racial profiling prohibitions or mandated increased training of law enforcement officers on implicit bias and its effect.

- > **document police operations:** To better track day-to-day patrol policies and practices, over half of states either sought to explore, or mandated the use of, body-worn cameras that can capture video and audio recordings of officer activities, including critical incidents such as officer-involved shootings. States also enacted laws protecting the rights of the public to digitally record law enforcement officers in the course of their duties. To better track how and when officers use force, several states also strengthened data collection and reporting requirements on officer use of force incidents.
- > **increase accountability in police use of force cases:** To improve accountability in relation to police use of deadly force, several states enacted laws to increase the independence of an investigation into these events. Some states also required that any decision not to bring charges must be justified and publicly disclosed. Still others undertook grand jury reform to counteract the perception by some that the grand jury process is too secretive and biased in favor of law enforcement.

For more information

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To learn more about 2015 and 2016 trends in state-level policing legislation, read the full report at www.vera.org/protect-and-serve. This report does not provide an exhaustive listing or analysis of every state criminal justice-related bill, ballot initiative, or

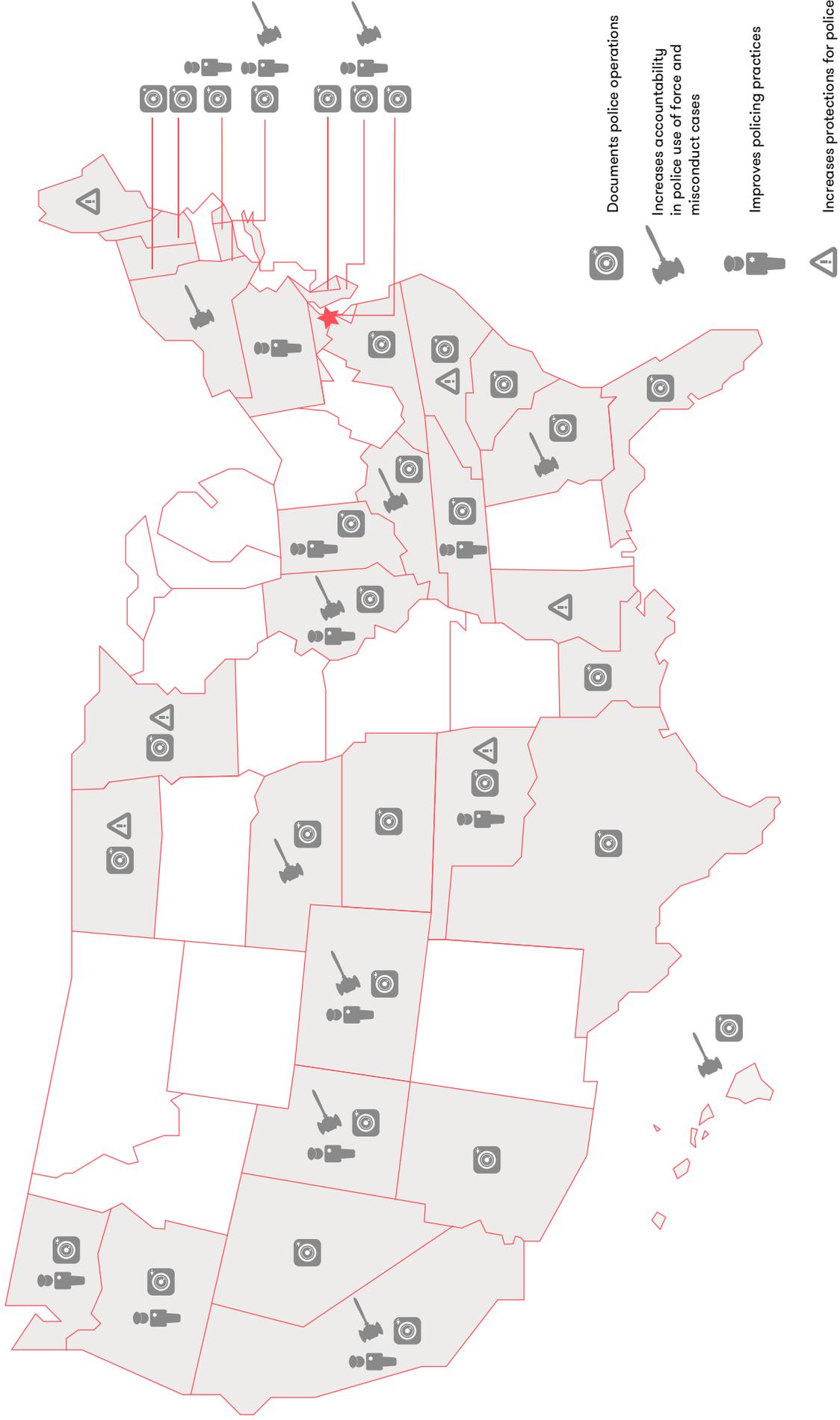
executive order in 2015 and 2016, but rather identifies and examines major trends.

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Mapping police reform in the states by bill type



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