

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/beyond-innocence/guilty-victims-have-suffered-too-and-deserve-our-care-1>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

I learned this summer that New York families devastated by homicide are eligible to have the burial costs for their loved one [paid for by victim services](#), but only if the deceased was an innocent victim. This means that if a victim were involved in illegal activity that led to his or her death, the family would not be eligible for these benefits. The implicit message of these requirements is clear: some lives matter more than others.

The notion of an innocent victim means that there are guilty victims, and sadly, many young men of color impacted by violence or who are victims of crime are assumed to be guilty victims. I see it in my work at the Crown Heights Community Mediation Center in Brooklyn. Our [Make It Happen](#) program works with many young men of color with a history of violence, gang involvement, incarceration, and generational poverty.

Despite their circumstances, many of the decisions they have made throughout their lives were to help keep them safe in an unsafe world. Safety is everyone's basic need. Some of the decisions that these clients may have made could have led to another person being harmed. For these decisions, these young people should be held accountable, ideally in a manner that causes no further harm to them.

Significantly, many of these young men are victims of violent incidents that are unrelated to any past action in which they were involved. Why should a murdered young man's family be denied survivor benefits just because he was a member of a gang when he was 14 years old?

Programs like Make It Happen are vital resources in our communities because they provide a supportive and healing environment for our young men of color and challenge this notion of innocent victims through advocacy efforts. Program participants are eligible for individual and group therapy, case management, mentoring, and advocacy. It is important for our clients to feel honored and respected, regardless of what personal obstacles brought them through our doors. Many of these young men would not consider getting help within a system they do not trust to adequately support their healing.

Many of the young men in our program have described horrific instances of personal victimization and they deserve equitable support as innocent victims. One moment that stands out for me was when one program participant described his own trauma history of family abuse and neglect, substance abuse, history of incarceration, and low self-worth but still expressed a strong desire to make changes in his life. While in our program, he was making amazing strides towards healing, but unfortunately he was arrested and is now facing a lengthy prison sentence. Some people would look at his life and only see his incarceration, conviction, and criminal history. However, it is very important to be mindful of what this young man has experienced.

As a clinician, I never want to be in a position where I might have to explain to a young man that the system we live in treats his suffering as less important than that of others. It is an unfortunate reality, but that is the message many of our young black and brown men are receiving. In the Make It Happen program, we do not condone criminal actions, but we also feel that it is important to not lose sight of the pain and compounded trauma our clients have experienced.

The [Beyond Innocence](#) blog series explores the limitations posed by existing frameworks and points to ways forward that better uphold the values of equity, public safety, and human dignity.

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