

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/new-funding-for-victim-services-could-enhance-racial-equity>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The federal appropriations bill passed last December raised the funding for victim services from \$745 million in the last fiscal year to \$2.361 billion in the current onean unprecedented increase in what are known as VOCA (for the [Victims of Crime Act](#)) funds. This increase carries implications not only for victim services, but for the criminal justice field as a whole, and presents an opportunity to move from scarcity to equity and reach the survivors that have been left out.

The victim services field has its roots as a civil rights movementone that started in the makeshift domestic violence shelters operated out of peoples living rooms and pop-up rape crisis centers in trailers in hospital and university parking lots. Some of the early leaders of the movement understood, lived, and spoke to the connections between the movements aim and the aims of the related movements for racial equity.

Thirty years of victim advocaciespecially for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assaulthas brought about lasting and paradigmatic change in our cultures response to these crimesand reached millions of victims, including countless women of color (and some men of color) whose needs would otherwise have gone unmet. Despite these successes and the [formidable work of many](#), however, achieving racial equity in the victim services field remains a daunting challenge.

Our recently published issue brief, [Young Men of Color and the Other Side of Harm: Addressing Disparities in Our Responses to Violence](#), focuses on the absence or exclusion of young men of color from most existing victim services, even though they are disproportionately victims of crime and violence. [Data show](#) that from 1996 through 2007, young black men were the most likely to be robbed every year, most likely to be victimized by violence overall in six of the 11 years, and second most likely to be victimized in four of the 11 years. At Common Justice, we regard this challenge as one of the key civil rights issues of our time, and we draw strength from the victims movement of which we are a part while continuing to push ourselves and our allies to do better.

The scarcity of resources for victim services in the face of so many urgent needs has limited our fields ability to be expansive in our commitment to the full range of crime survivors. Now that stands to change with an infusion of funds that if sustained will more than triple the size of the field. We have an opportunity to reinvigorate our commitment to equity, address the needs of victims of crime thus far excluded from services, and to ensure that our field continues to learn from those we have thus far left out. Every time we have done so before (in addressing the needs of immigrant survivors of domestic violence who are undocumented, for instance, or survivors of sexual assault who have disabilities), it has made the field better, and I believe in this case it will do the same. And this time we do not have to give up a dime of our existing resources to make it happen.

This increase in funding stands to reach beyond the victim services field to impact criminal justice practice as a whole. Nationally, [only about 10 percent of victims](#) of violent crime report that they received services after being hurt. That is devastating in itself. But it has an additional impact that is important to anyone who cares about criminal justice policy and practice. Victim services have long served as a conduit to advocacy directly, by raising the voices of those impacted, or indirectly, by lending legitimacy and authority to the agencies that serve them to speak and advocate on their behalf. These voices have had a powerful role in shaping our current criminal justice landscape. However, when our victim services are limited, so too is our understanding of what victims want.

As a country, our understanding of what victims want in the aftermath of harm has been artificially monolithic. By serving a greater portion of the full range of survivors of crime, we stand not only to rise to the ethical demands to address the pain of those who have been harmed, but also to develop a more informed and nuanced understanding of what criminal justice policies will actually deliver safety and justice to the greatest possible portion of victims. This conversation is an essential and often underestimated dimension of the related national conversation about mass incarceration, which will remain limited until it, too, brings in the voices and needs of the full range of crime survivors.

The path forward is by no means simple. First and foremost, it is not yet clear whether this is a one-time increase or whether the higher level of funding will be sustained into future years. The regulations that guide VOCA funds some of which go to the federal [Office for Victims of Crime](#), but the vast majority of which are passed through to and managed by the states are highly restrictive and complex. There are many existing programs that have experienced cuts or inadequate increases that need and deserve additional resources, including for staffing, training, and infrastructure. There are immense logistical challenges to be managed in getting the money out the door efficiently and effectively, as well.

These challenges notwithstanding, there is an opportunity for something extraordinary to take place that could change the justice landscape for generations. At this moment in our nations history, that is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss.

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