

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/hey-hollywood-we-all-look-like-real-prisoners>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The casting notice was looking for an actor to play an incarcerated person. But the casting agent wasn't looking for just anybody, they had a specific category of actor in mind: One who looked like a real prisoner. Which begs the question: What does Hollywood think a real prisoner looks like?

Jonathan Braylock, an actor and co-host of the [Black Men Cant Jump \(In Hollywood\)](#) podcast, who received the casting notice, has a pretty good idea. The only reason I look like a real prisoner is because I'm black, he said in a [Vulture article](#) for *New York Magazine* about offensive casting notices.

And judging by the portrayal of incarcerated people on television and in movies, this particular casting notice is not unique. Watch a movie or TV show set in a prison and you'll mostly see some variation of a theme: black or Latino men, muscle-bound and menacing. (Or, if they're feeling particularly gender-friendly, uneducated, street-savvy women of color.)

This is troubling, considering that men of color are more often [victims of crime](#) than white men. Although young men and women of color are overrepresented in the criminal justice system, data also suggests that these same people are [more likely to be arrested and incarcerated](#) than white men and women who commit similar crimes.

So what gives?

For those of us who don't have a first-class ticket to any destination across the globe, the closest most of us will get to learning about folks outside of our neighborhoods, towns, or cities is the media we consume. Images portrayed in popular culture tell us what other cultures and, indeed, what other *people* are like. When those portrayals skew toward stereotypes, we lose sight of the fact that people in prison are just like viewers at home: fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, neighbors and colleagues who may have made mistakes or maybe were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

These stereotypes permeate through our public knowledge until we no longer see the individual person, the life they have lived, the pain they have suffered, or the remorse they may feel. We are often shown just enough to convince us that incarcerated people are the other, thus informing how we interact with each other, how we trust, how we hire, and sometimes most devastatingly [how we police](#).

With fiction creating reality, our fictions become informed by reality, until it's unclear which is which. It's time for Hollywood and the media at large to stop relying on easy stereotypes and recognize that any of us regardless of gender, race, socioeconomic background, or cultural experience could look like a prisoner and that none of us deserve to have any aspect of our identities reduced to that possibility.

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