

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/beyond-the-zero-sum-game>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

In Attorney General Eric Holders recent speech to the American Bar Association, he spoke of bipartisan support for sensible sentencing practices and other strategies that stand to save our country billions of dollars while keeping us safe, suggesting that we no longer have to choose between Democrats and Republicans when it comes to criminal justice. But that may not be the biggest zero sum game we can put behind us.

The choice we no longer have to make every time, perhaps, is the choice between the people who commit crime and the victims of those crimes. There is a reason Holder can, in a single breath, speak about an outsized, unnecessarily large prison population, and about Vision 21, the Office for Victims of Crimes expansive and forward-thinking set of recommendations to meet the needs of victims of crime in the coming decades: the interests of those groups are not inherently opposed, nor are they made up of entirely different people.

The Attorney Generals call for innovation that prioritizes public safety and halts cycles of violence should be heeded as a challenge to develop sound practices that can hold people accountable and meet the needs of those harmed at the same time. These practices exist, and we can grow them. But if we are truly going to succeed in doing so, we also need an accurate and evolving sense of who is being harmed.

Contrary to popular belief, the person most likely to be harmed by violent crime both nationally and in New York City is a 16- to 24-year-old black man the same person most likely to commit those crimes. Black men in New York, for example, are six times more likely than white women, three times more likely than black women, and more than twice as likely as white men to become victims of robbery. And yet, most current victim services programs are ill-equipped to meet the needs of these young men when they are harmed. The failure of the current system to adequately engage these young men means they are more likely to live with unaddressed symptoms of trauma, less likely to get the help they deserve, and less likely to recover. Whats more, people who are harmed by crime and do not heal are more likely to commit violence themselves, a pattern that drives cycles of violence and further compromises the wellbeing of our communities. Therefore, providing this population with quality services is not only an ethical priority, it is also a sound crime prevention strategy.

As the nation looks to address the grave racial disparities in our criminal justice system, it is crucial for us to remember that those disparities do not stop with defendants, but extend to the experiences of victims, too. When we understand that the interests of victims and the demands of racial justice are not only compatible but entirely interdependent, we will be well on our way to creating a criminal justice system that upholds the ideals of equity, fairness, and accountability, and that serves to keep us all safe. We will miss the opportunity of this historical moment unless we recognize that it is not just that we can have both; its that we cant have one without the other.

This post is part of a series in which Vera experts respond to Attorney General Eric Holders recent address to the American Bar Association calling for comprehensive criminal justice reform. Share your thoughts in the comments section below and search for the hashtag #VeraResponds on Twitter to join the conversation.

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