

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/acknowledging-black-history-requires-uncomfortable-honesty>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

At the Vera Institute of Justice, we are committed to ending mass incarceration and ensuring equal justice for all.

However, achieving these commitments and ensuring we don't simply repeat past mistakes cannot be done without an explicit commitment to advancing racial equity. As [we have written in some of our recent reports](#) and as a growing number of scholars and activists have begun to discuss, the American criminal justice system is rooted in a history of white supremacy and racial control that spans from slavery and Jim Crow to the War on Drugs and modern police brutality. Real reform is not possible without an acknowledgement of this painful fact.

This Black History Month, it is more important than ever to reflect on this reality in order to better inform how we fight racial inequities both within the system and within our own place of work. We must work actively to combat the [racist and inaccurate rhetoric of tough on crime policies](#); we must end the [disparate rates of arrest, conviction, and incarceration for people of color](#); and we must [work to reverse the inhumane treatment of individuals who are currently incarcerated](#).

At Vera, we are leaning heavily into this work. Last year, we released a report called [Reimagining Prison](#), that traces incarceration's roots from slavery to Jim Crow to today's current era of mass incarceration and offers a vision for a new system rooted in human dignity. We are expanding our work to [transform the conditions of confinement for young men in prison](#), disproportionately young men of color, so that they can receive healing and mentorship. And, we are [embarking on a racial equity initiative within our own office](#) to develop an action plan for continued racial equity advancement.

But so much remains to be done. During Black History Month and beyond, we plan to use this space and our social media channels for reflections on our current efforts and on our aspirations to place racial equity at the center of our work moving forward. Advancing racial equity is a commitment that must go hand-in-hand with all criminal justice reform. We cannot untie the relationship between mass incarceration and racial inequity by any other way than by addressing it directly. Our acknowledgement of this truth, and our actions to do so, reflect the fierce urgency of now expressed by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. 56 years ago. That urgency lives on today and every other day, and we must embrace it fully.

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