

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/my-brothers-keeper/my-brothers-keeper-integrating-responses-to-victims-and-defendants>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The recently released My Brothers Keeper Task Force Report to the President includes a section on reducing violence and providing a second chance, which begins by saying, On the path to adulthood, youth may fall victim to violence or experience an interaction with the criminal justice system that permanently alters their trajectory for the worse. There are many things that make the My Brothers Keeper effort exciting and important, but one of its potentially most profound impacts might appear subtle at first: the task force report talks about victimization and criminal justice contact in the same breath.

Talking about victimization and criminal justice contact at the same time seems natural every violent crime has a victim, and so the commission of that crime and the impact of it on the person harmed are interlocked. However, in our national discourse, we often treat these as separate topics: we have one conversation about victimization and those who are harmed and an entirely separate one about incarceration and those who cause that harm. In so doing, we miss the opportunity to develop responses to crime that meet the needs of those harmed, those responsible, and public safety alike. And we also miss the point that when we talk about those who are hurt and those who do the hurting, we are talking about the same people.

There are concrete opportunities for us to develop interventions that address these integrated challenges with integrated solutions. At [Common Justice](#), a Vera demonstration project rooted in restorative justice principles, we offer an alternative to incarceration to those responsible for harm and a victim service program for those harmed. In addition to receiving services, those harmed have the opportunity to participate in a dialogue process that determines what sanctions the responsible person will have to complete to avoid a prison sentence including education, restitution, work, and other consequences of meaning to the victim. For some victims, this option resonates more fully with their sense of justice and safety than does a lengthy prison sentence for the responsible party. The lesson in their preference is profound: it means that leaders in the criminal justice arena should consider the development of more alternatives to incarceration not simply as an effective strategy for working with young people charged with crime, but also as one part of a larger effort to meet the needs of the full range of victims of crime.

In the coming weeks, Vera will release an issue brief on this topic, with a focus on the times when young men are harmed. The brief will discuss the frequency with which young men of color survive violent crime, the immediate and long-term impacts of that victimization, the barriers to young men accessing formal support in the aftermath of violence, and what can be done to address these disparities as part of an effort to advance equity and justice for all victims.

When the My Brothers Keeper Task Force recommends that we integrate public health and positive youth development strategies into federal, state, and local approaches to reducing violence in high-risk communities, it calls on us to draw on science and research to evaluate why violence happens and how we can stop it. But just as important, it challenges us to integrate our conversations about victims and defendants in a way that acknowledges the complexity and overlap of those categories.

Vera's [My Brothers Keeper](#) blog series provides insights from Vera staff and other experts on the recommendations President Obama's task force released in 2014, as part of [a progress report](#) on the My Brothers Keeper initiative. We invite your comments.

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