

# Vera Institute of Justice

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/reflecting-on-policing-freddie-gray-and-the-baltimore-uprisings-finding-common-ground-to-promote-healing>

### Public Facing Advocacy Writing

On the evening of Sunday, May 10, [Prince performed a benefit concert](#) at the Royal Farms Arena in downtown Baltimore City in honor of [Freddie Gray](#), the 25-year-old African American man who tragically died in Baltimore City Police Department (BCPD) custody from a traumatic spinal cord injury during police transport. The concert was one of several events sponsored citywide that focused on healing in the wake of the peaceful protests and dangerous riots that had taken place several weeks prior, in large part sparked by the controversial arrest and death of Mr. Gray.

As a native of Baltimore, I watched the major network news coverage with mixed emotions. The spotlight which had previously focused on [Eric Garner](#) in New York City, [Tamir Rice](#) in Cleveland, and [Michael Brown](#) in Ferguson, Missouri was now pointed at my hometown of Charm City. I am very familiar with the communities affected by the riots, as well as the indifference towards law enforcement that previously existed in certain neighborhoods. At its best, the media shed light on an issue that is not unique to Baltimore: the arrest and harm of unarmed African American men and women because of their interactions with law enforcement and the resulting community distrust. The Baltimore Sun's recent exposé, [Undue Force](#), provides a snapshot of numerous incidents of citizen abuse at the hands of police that provided the foundation for the unrest that occurred.

At its worst, the media attempted to write a narrative that emphasized the acts of those who rioted and damaged businesses rather than the positive ongoing work of community advocates to keep the peace, such as the [300 Men March](#) or the city government's renewed [effort to address black-on-black crime](#), which was undertaken prior to the uprisings. To its credit, the media eventually provided a balanced perspective by using their platform to grant access to not only law enforcement and city officials, but to faith leaders, community activists, and gang members alike so they could voice their concerns on a range of systemic and policing issues that plague communities.

The sentiment of distrust towards police due to aggressive practices was evident in [Vera's 2013 report on stop, question and frisk](#), where youth of color in New York City were surveyed regarding the proactive crime fighting strategy. The BCPD has used a range of similar policing practices to address crime and curtail illicit drug dealing and associated violence. Unfortunately, zero-tolerance policing tactics and aggressive crackdowns on crime by special units in high-crime neighborhoods has caused a major division between community residents and law enforcement based on increased arrests for men of color and the sentiment that their civil rights were being violated.

As a justice practitioner who has worked directly with people and families in home, correctional, and juvenile treatment environments, I have seen the unique social, structural, cultural, and situational factors underserved communities face. Barriers to educational, health, and employment resources can be daunting in communities where poverty and crime are prevalent, and the evident disparities and biases in the criminal justice system can be especially damaging and traumatic for [men of color](#).

Community growth and sustainability depends in part on responsive law enforcement officers who respect the community in which they serve and weeding out those officers who do not. The [charges filed against the six officers in the death of Freddie Gray](#) as well as [U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch's investigation of BCPD](#) has provided a temporary sense of calm. But [true healing](#) in Baltimore depends on the people and the police developing the mutual trust and respect that true partnerships are built upon.

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