

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/beyond-innocence/denying-victim-services-to-young-men-of-color-only-adds-to-their-pain-1>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

When children are harmed or killed, it kicks us in the gut with a steel-toed boot. How could someone hurt an innocent child? we ask. But another important question is whether that empathy would still be extended if the victim was 12 or 22, suspended from school for carrying a weapon, armed at the time of his or her death, or previously arrested for assault. Would his or her harm be any less significant?

Caring for one another, especially when we're hurt, is vital to our collective wellness and healing. Similarly, when people are harmed, acknowledgement and support should not be contingent upon how blameless or innocent we think they are because everyone's pain matters.

This misguided notion of innocence encourages us to discount victims we deem unworthy, giving us permission to discard so many people who like all of us are not perfect. Young men of color, in particular, are disproportionately underserved by victim services and related programs, in part because they aren't regarded as innocent or as hurt. Consider, for example, the attempts to invalidate Freddie Gray's murder by citing his criminal and substance use history. People deemed responsible for their own suffering are continuously denied assistance, shamed, and even incarcerated.

As the director of programs at [Common Justice](#), a Brooklyn-based victim service and alternative-to-incarceration program primarily serving 16- to 24-year-old men of color, I frequently encounter the challenges that victims confront when they're not perceived as innocent. For example, victims of crime are often deemed ineligible for compensation if they are believed to have not cooperated with law enforcement, no matter the violence they suffered.

Similar barriers arise with regard to contributory conduct, a term used to describe factors that law enforcement or the New York State Office of Victim Services consider to be proof that victims are somewhat, if not fully, responsible for the crime they endured, such as being involved in a gang when they were attacked or otherwise harmed. Although these disqualifiers apply to all crime victims who fit the criteria, young men of color are unquestionably among those most impacted and forced to grapple with the state's refusal to acknowledge their pain and support them through it. In addition to barriers to compensation, young men of color who have been harmed by violence often face shame and guilt when continuously ignored by systems and/or blamed for the trauma they experienced at the hands of another.

Being doubted and blamed often cultivates self-doubt, low self-esteem, and rage. On a daily basis, my team and I work with young men of color who were shot, stabbed, or robbed, and who struggle to believe that our program is for them. Our most crucial work is proving to these victims that their pain matters and that they didn't deserve the harm someone caused them.

Because when a young man of color can't find a face that looks like his on victim services posters, or is interrogated by police instead of offered support, or is automatically treated like a perpetrator of violence at a victim service agency, it's no surprise that his devaluation of himself and possibly others would only be magnified. Without systemic acknowledgement, empathy, and options for support, young men of color may very well view themselves as deviant and invisible, and because they can't connect to their own humanity and worth, grow more likely to hurt themselves and others.

So the next time you learn that someone was harmed, instead of trying to validate their innocence, just acknowledge and tend to their pain. Because all pain matters.

The [Beyond Innocence](#) blog series explores the limitations posed by existing frameworks and points to ways forward that better uphold the values of equity, public safety, and human dignity.

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