

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/my-brothers-keeper/are-good-programs-enough>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Last week, in a joyous yet sobering White House East Room meeting, President Obama announced a long awaited initiative My Brothers Keeper intended to improve opportunities and life outcomes for young African American men and, by extension, our communities. He was flanked by some of these young men who would benefit and a cast of philanthropic leaders.

As someone who has dedicated the entirety of his professional career to improving the fate of young men of color, it was hard not be thrilled with the Presidents sincere commitment and his use of the bully pulpit. In the late '80s and early '90s I worked at [Sasha Bruce Youthwork](#), a Washington, DC youth services organization, where I was an outreach counselor for teens who were in trouble, out of school, or doing dirt, as they used to say. And for close to 10 years, on and off, Ive worked at Vera. From both these experiences, I know there are both individual responsibility and structural dimensions to challenges confronting young men of color.

President Obama and the philanthropic partners who have signed on to invest \$200 million over the next five years promise to find the programs that improve life chances for young men of color and to replicate them. I couldnt agree more and we should laud the effort. As Assistant Attorney General Karol Mason said [in her blogpost](#) about the initiative, it is designed to help every young man who works hard and plays by the rules have a chance to reach his full potential. Hard to argue with that.

But I also hope, as Masons blog post suggests and [as others have observed](#), that the initiatives architects will focus their firepower on more than *deserving* individuals and good programs. They should also look deeply at changing the structural factors government policies and practices, among them that are leading contributors to poor long-term outcomes for our young men. There are efforts around the country they can learn from and seek to replicatesuch as, how New York City and New York State have begun to stanch the flow of kids into expensive and ineffective upstate detention facilities, and work with them [close to home, close to family](#). They can look to the good work of a few [brave and leading prosecutors](#), like John Chisolm of Milwaukee, who have changed case acceptance and supervisory policies in order to reduce disparities that resulted in more people of color being further ensnared in the justice system.

The President told those assembled in the East Room that government cant fix the problem by itself. True enough. But there is a lot government can and should do to rectify unfair and unwise policies and practices the *structural* determinants of inequity and blocked opportunity. Vera has a long track record of helping government do just this, and we will continue to do so with even more vigor and commitment in the coming years. I hope this element of the challenge is something that the architects of My Brothers Keeper take to heart.

After all, it is not just about helping the rule followers. We also need to address some of the rules of the game.

Veras [My Brothers Keeper](#) blog series provides insights from Vera staff and other experts on the recommendations President Obamas 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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