

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/kalief-browders-tragic-story-is-shocking-but-not-unique>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The [details of Kalief Browder's case](#), incarceration at Rikers Island, and its aftermath are shocking. A 16-year-old held at Rikers for three years without a trial, two of them spent in solitary confinement. Beatings from other inmates and correctional officers. Conditions so dispiriting that he attempted to commit suicide twice. Promises to release him from jail, so long as he pleaded guilty to a crime he insists that he did not commit. His suicide earlier this month two years after his release.

Shocking, yes, but not unique. Kalief's story reflects the real life impact of a justice system that sends the message that committing a crime or even being accused of one strips you of the privilege of being treated like a citizen of this country. His death is on all of our consciences as we have allowed our justice system which is meant to deter crime, punish people who commit crimes, and then rehabilitate them to operate in a way that degrades the people that we place under its control.

As a psychologist who works to reform the justice system, I tell people that one of the primary reasons I do this job is to eliminate the harm that the justice system, particularly incarceration, inflicts on individuals and communities. Many people leave our jails and prisons with [a greater burden](#) of emotional and psychological trauma than when they entered the system, which may contribute to why [suicide is one of the leading causes of death](#) after release from prison or jail.

The emotional toll that incarceration can have on a person is unsurprising considering the range of [physical, sexual, and emotional abuses](#) to which incarcerated people are subjected, as well as the [damaging psychological effects](#) of solitary confinement, a practice long understood to contribute to increased anxiety, paranoia, hallucinations, and depression. Young people like Kalief, whose brains are still developing, are particularly susceptible to the effects of [prolonged isolation](#).

Although New York City government and corrections officials have worked to improve the conditions at Rikers Island particularly in the [juvenile facility](#) our justice system still places too many people in the position of having to overcome the trauma of incarceration.

We cannot say for sure how Kalief's life would have gone if he had not been sent to Rikers. But we can say that his death rests on all of our doorsteps. It embodies our failure to work towards a justice system that strikes a balance between keeping our communities safe and respecting the human dignity of every person.

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