

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/breaking-point/responding-to-the-lasting-impact-of-violence>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

When poverty, mental health, and criminal justice intersect, violence often plays a key role. And while not every mental health issue is rooted in traumatic experience, violence and its associated impacts have a profound effect on the well-being of those harmed. Our society's response to that harm is not only a measure of our mental health systems, but a measure of our commitment to equity.

This is true in part because young men of color, who are among the groups mostly likely to be victims of crime (and are far and away the group most likely to be victims of homicide), are *sounlikely* to be met with any formal victim services. This leaves them more likely to live with unaddressed symptoms of trauma and less likely to recover. What is more, their victimization is likely to happen [in a larger context](#) of structural inequity, poverty, and disenfranchisement that diminishes their access to necessary supports. The effects of violent crime extend beyond those experienced by the victim, as well, from significant financial costs to governments to the corrosive impact it can have on individual communities.

The impact of failing to rise to this challenge is enormous. In addition to physical pain and injury, violent crime has emotional consequences for those harmed as well as their loved ones and those who witness the violence including post-traumatic stress and lasting impacts on a person's health, employability, education, and safety. [In one study](#), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was found to have a more significant impact on health status than smoking or alcohol use.

And the impacts reach beyond health. Responses to traumatic experiences like surviving a violent crime flashbacks triggered by everyday events like sounds or smells, trouble sleeping and nightmares, a sense of danger even in safe spaces, and panic attacks can interrupt a student's education and diminish his or her chances of achieving, while also contributing to disciplinary concerns. PTSD in particular can inhibit a person's ability to focus, maintain regular schedules, and respond to people with power over them in a socially acceptable way, affecting people at work in many of the same ways it impacts them at school.

Addressing these disparities requires developing new and innovative interventions that express a commitment to equity for victims, including young men of color. Doing so also requires recasting a persistent and pervasive narrative that over-represents young men of color as aggressors or criminals. This narrative, often amplified by the media, includes the misperception that violence and pain somehow impact young men of color less profoundly than other victims, a distortion that may limit our ability to accurately recognize symptoms of trauma (such as being overly reactive to perceived threats) as natural human responses to pain and fear rather than signs of character flaws or moral failure. Transforming this narrative matters, not only because young men of color internalize its negative messages, but because it can also powerfully shape how others see and treat them with serious implications for social services, the criminal justice system, and the development of an equitable society more broadly.

Vera is pleased to complement the WNYC broadcast, *Breaking Point: New York's Mental Health Crisis*, with [a blog series](#) that features the voices of experts from a range of fields as they examine how the nexus of poverty, mental health, and the criminal justice system affects nearly every aspect of New York City life.

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