

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/what-about-those-who-survive-addressing-the-victimization-of-young-men-of-color>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

We wrote and prepared to release our new issue brief, [*Young Men of Color and the Other Side of Harm: Addressing Disparities in our Response to Violence*](#), long before the grand juries in Ferguson and Staten Island reached their decisions. This brief is not specifically about the violence committed by law enforcement against men of color, nor is it about men of color who are killed. It is, however, about a context that in our view is immensely relevant to our national conversation at this moment: it is about what happens to young men of color who survive. As our nation engages in an urgent conversation about the profound long-standing inequities in our legal system and the role of law enforcement in communities of color in particular, it is important to recognize the unquestionable necessity for this conversation and also know that law enforcement is by no means the only arena in which we as a society fail to communicate that black lives matter.

As the director of [*Common Justice*](#), a project that is, in part, a victim service program that works primarily with men of color, I have been haunted by the question: What would we, as a society, have done for Trayvon Martin, for Michael Brown, for Akai Gurley, for Eric Garner for all the other men whose deaths have finally captured our national attention if they had survived? What would we have offered if they had been injured but not dead, traumatized but still breathing? And I am challenged, pained, and outraged by what I have learned through painstaking efforts to find evidence of the contrary: in all likelihood, we would not have done much. As a white woman, when I survived sexual assault in my late teens, there were many programs available to me. The very existence of these programs communicated to me that I mattered, that what happened to me was wrong, and that I was deserving of care. And that message from our society especially when it is reinforced in countless subtle ways by our media and other social institutions offers a profound and essential support to healing. It fortifies the belief that our suffering is and should be of importance to others, and in doing so, helps us access care not only from the programs themselves, but from others we trust and love. It communicates that we are not to blame for what we survived. And it includes us, rather than isolates us, at our time of deepest pain, alienation, fear, and need for connection.

As described in this issue brief, we have failed profoundly as a nation with a few noble and ground-breaking exceptions to make a comparable effort to provide young men of color who survive violence with the services and support they need and deserve, even though these same young men are among those in our country most likely to be harmed. This failure to do so is rooted in narratives and structures as old as our country that all too often devalue the pain of people of color. It is rooted in the variety of ways from the messages in our media to the priorities of our legislatures we are conditioned to see men of color as dangerous and guilty of violence, and therefore somehow incapable of being victims. Intentional or not, the lack of services for young male survivors of color communicates and amplifies society's message that their pain is not our concern. And it robs them of the opportunity to heal. As we all try to rise to the challenge of this urgent but not new moment in our history, and as we grieve those who are no longer with us and hold their loved ones in our hearts, we at Common Justice will continue to do our best to meet the needs of those young men of color who do survive and to share in this corner of our growing national movement to say and mean that black lives matter. We offer this issue brief as a modest contribution to that effort.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.