

Young Men of Color and the Other Side of Harm

addressing disparities in our responses to violence

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FROM VERA'S PRESIDENT

To be truly fair and effective, the criminal justice system must take into account the experiences of victims. From our work decades ago that led to the creation of Safe Horizon—New York City's premier victim services organization—to our Center on Victimization and Safety and Common Justice demonstration project today, Vera is committed to a justice system that meets the needs of people who have been harmed.

Of equal long standing is our commitment to eliminating the racially disparate impacts of the criminal justice system. This brief brings together these commitments by drawing attention to a large but often overlooked group of victims: young men of color who survive violent crime. I hope it will help foster efforts—both local and nationwide—to provide them with the compassionate support and services they need and deserve.



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INTRODUCTION

The challenges facing young men of color have moved to the forefront of public discourse on equity and opportunity. Attention is increasingly being paid to the disparities they experience, as well as to a variety of barriers to economic advancement, educational attainment, and positive health outcomes. Woven throughout this attention is a concern about the disproportionate involvement of young men of color in the criminal justice system as those responsible for crime.¹

Still missing, however, is recognition that these young men are also disproportionately victims of crime and violence. There is no evidence suggesting that the same disparities that exist when young men of color are defendants disappear when they are victims. Addressing the structural biases that contribute to racial disparities in the criminal justice system, therefore, must include comparable consideration of their experience as victims.

Addressing these disparities also requires recasting a persistent and pervasive narrative that over-represents young men of color as aggressors or criminals.² This narrative, which is 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.³ 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.⁴

BACKGROUND

Despite the overall decline in the rate of violent crime nationwide since the early 1990s, violence remains an urgent concern for many communities.⁵ In addition to physical pain and injury, violent crime has emotional consequences for those harmed, including post-traumatic stress and other impacts that can last a lifetime.⁶ The impact of violent crime extends beyond the victim to include emotional damage, such as loss and fear, to the loved ones of those harmed and to those who witness the violence; corrosion of overall community well being; and significant financial costs to government.⁷

ABOUT COMMON JUSTICE

Common Justice is a victim service and alternative-to-incarceration program based in restorative justice principles. Restorative justice is a process that brings together those most immediately impacted by harm—including the person responsible for the harm, the person harmed by it, and their support people—to address the harm and reach agreements as to how the responsible party can make things as right as possible. Common Justice applies these practices, integrated into a violence intervention model, with young people, 16 to 24 years old, who commit serious felonies such as robbery and assault, and with those they harm. Seventy percent of the victims Common Justice has served are men of color.

For more information, visit <http://www.vera.org/project/common-justice>.

Although young men of all races between the ages of 16 and 24 experience higher rates of violence than any other age group, including assault and robbery, data collected by the Bureau of Justice Statistics at the U.S. Department of Justice from 1996 through 2007 show that young black men were the most likely to be robbed every year, most likely to be victimized by violence overall in six of the 11 years, and second most likely to be victimized in four of the 11 years.⁸ For young men of color, this violence is also more likely to include homicide.⁹ According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, homicide is the leading cause of death for young black males ages 10 to 24.¹⁰ The impact of this disparity can be especially acute in urban settings, where homicide is more common.¹¹ In New York City, for instance, in the first half of 2012, 96 percent of shooting victims (fatal and nonfatal) were black or Latino.¹² Added to the challenge is the fact that the victimization young men of color experience is likely to happen in a larger context of structural inequity, poverty, and disenfranchisement that diminishes their access to necessary supports: roughly three times as many black children, for instance, live in poverty as compared to white children.¹³ In part because of that same context, young men of color are among the many groups of victims who for a range of reasons are unlikely to report the violence they experience—groups that include people with disabilities, undocumented immigrants, and others.¹⁴

Furthermore, young men's victimization in adolescence is often not their first experience being harmed. The U.S. Department of Justice and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence reveals that as many as one in 10 children in the United States are "polyvictims"—people who have survived multiple kinds of victimization.¹⁵ Such exposure can have a cumulative effect. According to the final report of the United States Attorney General's Task Force on Children Exposed to Violence, "the toxic combination of exposure to family violence, child physical and sexual abuse, and exposure to community violence increases the risk and severity of posttraumatic injuries and health and mental health disorders for exposed children by at least twofold and up to tenfold."¹⁶ Understanding the cumulative impact of repeated exposure to violence must therefore inform the creation of effective, developmentally-targeted interventions for children who are victimized, as well as parallel interventions for adolescents whose earlier trauma may have gone unaddressed and whose current trauma may be exacerbated by that history.

A NATIONAL CHALLENGE

Research indicates that young men of color who have been victims of crime and violence often do not get the help they need.¹⁷ For more than 30 years, the victim services field has worked to develop a system of support for victims of crime, including financial assistance, legal services, advocacy for victims' rights, and more. Alongside those broader efforts, specialized services have been developed for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault—ranging from shelters to therapeutic interventions to targeted, culturally responsive programs—that take into account the particular needs and experiences of these victims. However, there has not been a parallel effort to meet the needs of young men of color when they are victims of crime and violence. This includes few services for victims of the crimes young men of color are most likely to experience (i.e.

robbery and stranger assault), as well as few services that account for the specific culture, experiences, and needs of this group.

This national challenge has both safety and ethical dimensions. The recently released *Vision 21: Transforming Victim Services* report from the federal Office of Victims of Crime (OVC) charts a course for victim services in the coming decade and identifies young men of color among the populations the field has struggled—and must now work—to serve.¹⁸ Indeed, OVC explicitly acknowledges elsewhere: “The data on victimization of young male victims of color, including African Americans and Latinos, is especially troubling and is rarely an area of focus of many traditional victim service providers. There are few nonprofit victim-serving organizations that have the resources and expertise to provide comprehensive, accessible services to male victims of any race or ethnicity who are physically or sexually assaulted or otherwise victimized, nor are many of these victims likely to access victim services available through law enforcement or prosecutorial agencies.”¹⁹

Nevertheless, those trying to expand victim services to young men of color can look to the experience of existing victim service providers for valuable guidance and shared leadership. While the need for services to victims of sexual assault and domestic violence continues to exceed the resources available, the achievements of the field are formidable, and much can be learned from those efforts about how to build and sustain a widely available, effective, and institutionalized network of support for victims when we attend to their particular experiences and needs.

WHY IT MATTERS

As described below, the limitations of existing systems’ capacity to adequately engage young men of color when they are harmed means they are less likely to seek and receive support, more likely to live with unaddressed symptoms of trauma, and less likely to recover. Experience with victims suggests the trauma of surviving an act of violence often carries lasting impacts for those harmed and can have significant implications for a wide array of domains, including health, employment, education, safety, and local and national budgets.

Health. Many violent crimes cause lasting injuries with significant physical and mental health implications. In addition, exposure to trauma can significantly increase an individual’s chances of developing a variety of diseases, including cardiovascular, musculoskeletal, digestive, endocrine, and circulatory disorders.²⁰ In one study, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was found to have a more significant impact on health status than smoking or alcohol use.²¹ Many victims of violent crime suffer from symptoms of post-traumatic stress, which includes significant mental and physical health consequences, and 28 to 45 percent of victims of violent crime manifest those symptoms to a degree that constitutes PTSD.²² Yet these estimates reflect only a fraction of crime victims, as 92 percent of all victims of robbery and 91 percent of victims of assault received no known assistance after being the victim of crime.²³

Education. 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

“[Being hurt] made me vengeful, made me shaky at work and school, and [made me think] that I couldn’t trust nobody.”

—Common Justice participant

“When I was robbed and beaten, I wasn’t a victim. I was almost a victim. A victim is a chalk outline on the street”

—Common Justice advisory group member

interrupt a student’s education and diminish his or her chances of achieving, while also contributing to disciplinary concerns.²⁴ 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.²⁵

New York City, through a range of efforts including Young Men’s Initiative, is working to reduce inequities in part by investing in programs that support young men of color’s access to education and employment.²⁶ Investing in those efforts while also addressing the trauma and violence young men experience presents an opportunity to more fully realize the benefits and impacts of this work.²⁷

Employment. Even for people who have held jobs for decades, traumatic experiences can affect their ability to function effectively or do their best at work.²⁸ For people who are newer to paid employment and still developing the skills necessary to obtain and retain a job, these symptoms may pose additional challenges. Given that most workplaces and employment programs are ill equipped to address trauma directly and may not be appropriate venues for doing so, dedicated services and supports need to be available outside of these settings to help trauma survivors obtain or maintain employment and fully benefit from employment-related programs.

Safety. Research shows that some people who are victimized and do not sufficiently recover from the experience are more likely to commit violence themselves.²⁹ For younger people who survive violence in particular, alongside other symptoms described above, their response may also manifest as retaliatory violence; affiliating with peers they believe may be able to protect them in the future; and as hypervigilance—an exaggerated sense of perceived threats and a common symptom of trauma.³⁰ Young men generally are more likely to be socialized to respond to threats with aggression, so if trauma enhances a young man’s sense of being threatened, it is likely to enhance his subsequent response—and he may perceive and act on a need to protect himself even when he is not in danger.³¹ Therefore, addressing the harm young men survive is not only an ethical issue or an issue that impacts their own achievement; it is a public safety one, as cycles of violence inherently put others at risk.³²

Cost. Ongoing physical and mental health concerns, reduced or interrupted employment, and perpetration of violent crime linked to an incident of victimization carry not only a human cost, but also a financial one. Absent effective services that interrupt cycles of violence and help limit the extent and duration of survivors’ trauma symptoms, these costs can be lasting on social service systems ranging from law enforcement to hospitals to public aid.³³ A 2001 study, for instance, estimated the cost to society of each gun-related injury to be \$1.2 million.³⁴

THE BARRIERS TO SUPPORT

In several focus groups conducted by Vera in 2007 and 2008, young men of color ages 16 to 18 were asked what they might want or need if they were victims of a crime. They almost invariably identified a consistent range of services largely unavailable through existing victim services, including help securing employment, getting back to school or into GED programs, and developing tools to end the gang involvement or resolve the neighborhood-based conflicts that put them in

harm's way.³⁵ For young men of color who have been victimized, however, significant barriers to receiving such services persist.

Limited services. There are very few comprehensive victim service agencies that serve victims of crime like robbery, and those that do exist see very few young men of color come through their doors.³⁶ Because victim service agencies serve so few young men of color, service providers are often untrained and unprepared to address their unique needs.

The services that these organizations provide (such as developing plans for victims' safety that include engaging law enforcement as the primary and central strategy) are also often not those that young men of color seek. Furthermore, the context in which those services are provided—such as comprehensive victim services agencies that focus primarily on domestic violence or sexual assault, where few men are served as victims; groups with no other men of color; or offices housed by or explicitly linked to law enforcement agencies or courts—are not always settings that young men experience as inclusive of their needs and experience.

Still other programs—ranging from education and employment to reentry services—often do not incorporate an understanding of trauma into their models or are not well equipped to make appropriate referrals for participants who disclose having survived a traumatic experience.³⁷ Because young men of color are already receiving services at many of these programs and may have trusting relationships with staff, the lack of a trauma lens in the work means programs miss the opportunity to serve as a point of access to healing and support.

Self-perception. The term “victim” does not resonate with many young men, especially given their age and cultural norms about what it means to be “a man.” In addition, many of them share popular misconceptions about what “a victim” looks like. They receive the same messages as the rest of society, from family, friends, media, law enforcement, and community members about who victims are and whose victimization matters.³⁸ In part as a result of this discourse, young men are often unlikely to see themselves as victims even when they are harmed.³⁹

For instance, in 2008, Vera conducted a focus group about cycles of violence with 16- to 18-year-old men—all men of color—coming home from serving sentences at Rikers Island jail to identify their experiences with and explore their perceptions of victimization. One of the lessons that emerged was that despite their experience of having been harmed, the participants did not self-identify as “victims.” When asked broadly if they had been “victims of crime,” they all responded no. However, when asked whether they had “had something taken from them by force or been robbed,” nine of the 10 said yes. When asked whether they had been “jumped, seriously hurt in a fight they didn't initiate, or assaulted,” nine of the 10 said yes, and when asked whether they had “had something taken from their home by someone they didn't know or been burglarized,” eight of the 10 said yes.⁴⁰

Negative experiences with law enforcement. When a young man of color is the victim of a violent crime, it is likely that by the time he is harmed, he or someone close to him will have experienced a negative encounter with the police.⁴¹ Many young men have reported that such encounters significantly diminished their faith in the justice system's capacity to deliver to them a sense of safety and justice.⁴² It also reduced the likelihood that they would ask for or be referred to sup-

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“As a man I brushed off what happened to me because I wasn’t supposed to feel or be too hurt about it. I said, ‘It already happened, it is what it is.’”

—Common Justice participant

portive services, or that they would report similar crimes in the future. A recent Vera study found that each instance of being stopped and frisked reduced the respondents’ likelihood of calling the police when they or others were harmed by 8 percent.⁴³ Moreover, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, which conducts an annual national victimization survey to learn about trends in unreported crime, violent victimizations overall that were not reported to police increased by 130 percent from 2011 to 2012. These crimes accounted for the majority of the increase in total violence nationwide—a trend that points to the importance of these relationships as a dimension of ensuring public safety.⁴⁴

Resources. The lack of dedicated resources to develop effective, culturally appropriate, geographically accessible services for young men when they are harmed significantly limits the development of new programs or the expansion of existing programs to include a focus on trauma and healing.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

This is a moment of both crisis and opportunity for the survival and well being of young men of color in the United States. While largely uncoordinated with one another, there are both new and veteran community-based organizations, schools, law enforcement professionals, elected officials, and others taking up this urgent challenge. In addition, a number of platforms have emerged in recent years dedicated to these issues, including the National Network of Hospital-Based Violence Intervention Programs, the Institute for Black Male Achievement, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Forward Promise initiative, and the White House’s recently launched My Brother’s Keeper effort, which has been joined by the business and philanthropic communities.⁴⁵

As one contribution to this growing national momentum, Vera’s Common Justice is developing a learning collaborative for people and organizations who are or could be working with young men of color who have been harmed by violence.⁴⁶ The collaborative will include traditional victim service providers, youth programs, and others working to address the trauma young men experience. Participants will identify challenges, share practices and strategies, and develop relationships to support this essential work. The goal of the collaborative is to build a field that advances equity, dignity, and healing from harm, and that leverages research and on-the-ground experience to foster a set of strategies and responses that are as nuanced, effective, and resourced as the issue merits and requires. Together with others in the field, the collaborative members can begin to answer questions such as:

- What are the most promising emerging practices for integrating trauma-informed care into existing programs serving young men?
- How can law enforcement agencies be supported in addressing implicit bias so that young men of color harmed by crime are met with respect, care, and coordination with appropriate resources?
- What strategies exist to help intervene in cycles of violence, even with those young people who have caused harm?
- How can philanthropy support community-based organizations in integrating an understanding of trauma into their work on the ground?

- What can we learn from the young men themselves in this process?

There is a great deal of room for growth in developing, evaluating, and sharing what works to bring about positive change in the lives of young men of color. And as a country, we stand to benefit from a concerted effort to identify and support promising, culturally responsive, developmentally-targeted models that address individual and structural factors, and to catalyze further innovation in this area. The ability of our social institutions—from law enforcement to schools to community-based organizations—to address trauma and pain alongside the other challenges young men of color face will shape the degree to which we are able to advance equity, opportunity, health, and justice for them in the years to come.

ENDNOTES

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