

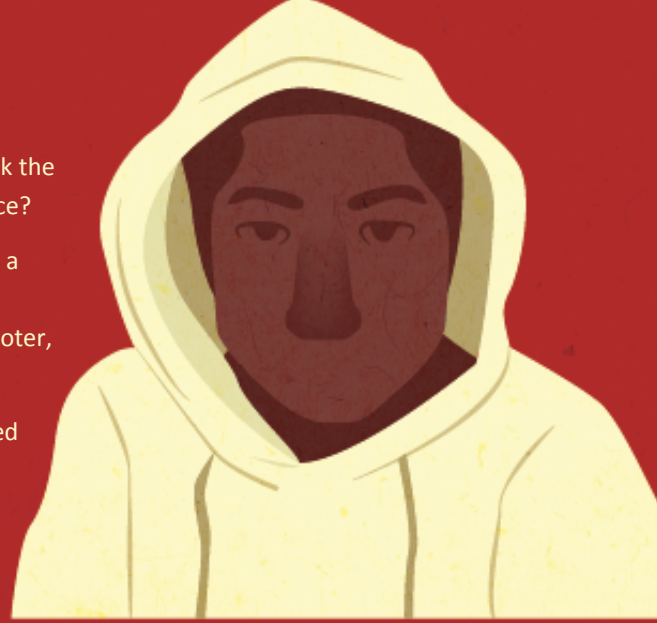
CRIMINAL JUSTICE

The goal of the criminal justice system is to arrest, detain, and punish people who break the law. But in an attempt to protect society, can justice-seeking sometimes lead to injustice?

Consider the case of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed teenager who was shot and killed by a neighborhood watch coordinator because he “looked suspicious.” Martin was African American, and wearing a hooded sweatshirt. This was enough for a jury to find the shooter, George Zimmerman, not guilty.

Black men (and boys) are more likely than other ethnic groups and women to be treated unfairly in an encounter with law enforcement.

For those who are found guilty, study after study demonstrates that prison sentencing is unequal, with Black and Latino men being given longer sentences than White men who commit similar crimes. However, once released, all former convicts face an uphill battle to reintegrate into society – with many job opportunities and even the right to vote being closed to them.



CALL TO ACTION

“I think my activism in the purest sense of activism was really triggered my first year of law school, when the Trayvon Martin murder occurred, and George Zimmerman was not arrested. He went home that day, after he shot and killed Trayvon Martin, and so that led to nationwide protests. And actually, I participated in protests, and that was the first time I was like, ‘Oh, wow. So, you really have to yell and scream and protest injustices.’ This did not end after the civil rights movement. You have to do it as long as you want to have the rights that you’re guaranteed. Not only as under the U.S. constitution, but as a human being. You have to constantly voice your displeasure with oppressive forces.” — Funmi

“One gentleman [I defended] I had 22 years after the crime occurred. He no longer lived in Redlands [where the crime occurred]. He was a professor at a University in Arizona. And he was literally ripped out of there and brought back to this county, where he spent two years in county jail before it was factually proven he had nothing to do with that murder 22 years ago. At the time he was arrested and charged, it was huge news. When they dismissed it, there wasn’t one reporter in the courtroom. Project Innocence here in California, they have statistics about the number of people who are wrong fully convicted.” — Suzanne

CONSIDER THIS *Consider the following questions. Challenge yourself to think of answers from multiple perspectives, & to understand what might bias your response. Discuss these topics with someone else in your class.*

Does the law protect everyone equally? Does the law punish everyone equally? What obstacles does a formerly incarcerated person face when trying to turn his or her life around?

Several In|Dignity participants describe encounters with the police where they felt mistreated, harassed, and discriminated against because of their race or ethnicity. If the majority of people arrested are racial/ethnic minorities, is profiling a useful tool for law enforcement?

Should employment opportunities be closed to formerly incarcerated individuals? Would you hire a former convict? Why or why not?

