



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
OFFICE OF COMMUNITY ORIENTED POLICING SERVICES
Office of the Director
145 N Street, NE, Washington, D.C. 20530

COPS★

Am I My Brother's Keeper?

In the biblical story of Cain and Abel, Cain asks, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” This question symbolizes the eternal human struggle to determine to what extent we, as a society, are responsible for the well-being of others in our community. The President has asked—and, quite frankly, challenged—us all to think about this question as it relates to young men and boys of color. “There are a lot of kids out there who need help, who are getting a lot of negative reinforcement. And is there more that we can do to give them the sense that their country cares about them and values them and is willing to invest in them?”¹ This concern is why he recently launched a new initiative called “My Brother’s Keeper” that aims “to help more young men of color facing especially tough odds to stay on track and reach their full potential.”²

I am not the first to point out that the disproportionate number of Black and Hispanic young men who are involved in the criminal justice system brings to question the very legitimacy of the system and undermines family and community stability. Unfortunately, there is also no clear divide between arrests and victimization of this populace: despite being a relatively small percentage of the population, young men and boys of color are more than six times more likely to be victims of murder than their white peers, and account for almost half of the country’s murder victims each year.³ In this context, the My Brother’s Keeper initiative is more than just a program; it is a direct question from the President to law enforcement: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” I believe the answer to this question is contained within the most widely used version of the Law Enforcement Oath of Office, which in part states: “I will always uphold the Constitution, the community, and the agency I serve.”⁴ Every time a new officer takes this oath or a veteran officer reaffirms the oath, they are answering the question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” with a resounding, “Yes.”

Law enforcement plays a central role in looking after the safety and well-being of everyone in the community, actively ensuring the public has access to the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that were enumerated in the Declaration of Independence. With the My Brother’s Keeper initiative, law enforcement has a unique opportunity to play a major leadership role in changing the historic paradigm of inequity when it comes to young men and boys of color and our criminal justice system. If we work together to build better relationships with young men and boys of color, we can rely on those improved relationships to strengthen public safety for everyone.

In the law enforcement profession, more than any other profession, you acquire the experience, and possess the perfect courage and credibility, to lead such an effort. Every day you witness firsthand not just the impacts of disparate outcomes on families and communities, but also the power of change when opportunities and choices are available. As the most visible face of local government in many people’s lives, you are already seen as leaders in your local communities—individuals capable of bringing organizational skills and resources to bear on local problems. Most important, you already understand that protecting individual constitutional rights is not only synonymous with protecting public safety; it is a requisite of it. You are, by the very nature of your job and daily heroic deeds, the nation’s strongest and most respected “constitutional advocates.” You have earned this honorary title in many ways over the last 25 years, most notably by speaking out against injustice, supporting hate crime legislation, calling for an end to racial profiling, regularly protecting those who exercise their free speech rights, and advocating against discriminatory immigration laws that would undermine trust within your communities that is central to effective public safety and homeland security.

¹ President Barack Obama, July 19, 2013.

² President Barack Obama, January 28, 2014.

³ White House Fact Sheet, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/02/27/fact-sheet-opportunity-all-president-obama-launches-my-brother-s-keeper->, accessed 3/18/14.

⁴ International Association of Chiefs of Police, “Law Enforcement Oath of Honor,” <http://www.theiacp.org/What-is-the-Law-Enforcement-Oath-of-Honor>, accessed 3/19/14.



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As constitutional advocates it is your responsibility to acknowledge those in your community who do not hold the full promise of the American dream. We must also acknowledge that inequality and the loss of public trust in the criminal justice system is a threat to public safety, and one that is within our power to address. Because public safety for all is the goal of community policing, the COPS Office will be working to support law enforcement in their efforts as constitutional advocates. On April 4, 2014 the COPS Office will host the first of a series of executive convenings on building communities of trust. This first forum, in New York City, will identify and develop progressive approaches to strengthen the relationship between law enforcement and communities of color. Leaders from across the country will discuss challenges, share promising strategies, and brainstorm creative and actionable solutions to these issues. I look forward to sharing the proceedings and outcomes of the forum in the coming months, and in working with all of you to inspire the public to join you in the effort to end racial disparities in the criminal justice system. Together we can ensure equality in justice and safety for those who have historically suffered the most, and in doing so, we will ensure it for everyone. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

To learn more about the My Brother's Keeper Initiative and how to get involved in leading the effort, please visit <http://www.whitehouse.gov/my-brothers-keeper>.

Sincerely,

Director Ronald Davis