

Voices: What justice looks like for families of suspects and defendants

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EDITOR'S NOTE: "Justice looks like ..." is a special series in the Voices column. Readers will have the opportunity to consider justice from numerous viewpoints. The series is based on each writer's understanding of Scripture and relationship with Jesus Christ. Writers present their own views independent of any institution, unless otherwise noted in their bios.

You are encouraged to listen to each writer without prejudgment. Then, engage in conversation with others around you about what justice looks like to you.

[Click here](#) for more information about the series. [Click here](#) to read the full "Justice looks like..." series.

The mother of a capital murder defendant telephoned months after the trial requesting assistance on an unrelated matter.

During the trial, the mother and other family members understandably were distant from law enforcement officers. At times, the family members were uncomfortable and maintained a self-imposed distance. The mother stated she did not know who she could ask for help.

I often have thought about this interaction and the fate of families whose loved one was suspected of or tried for a crime that shocked the moral and legal conscience.

Whether a person is on trial for or found guilty of killing someone during the commission of a crime, family members of the defendant can be condemned as guilty by association. I label this group unnamed victims of crime, or UVC.

Treatment of unnamed victims of crime

There is no category for UVCs in academic research. UVCs are siloed and set aside until needed for court testimony or a documentary.

It is not uncommon for these families to receive direct and veiled threats due to their loved one's criminal action(s). Social media is a breeding ground for untoward comments and rants aimed at innocent family members, often for the sole purpose of gaining "likes" and reposts.

I am surprised at the negativity expressed by people who profess to be steadfast in their faith, but condemn UVCs for a family member's criminal behavior.

Recently, a professing Christian stated the closest relative of a suspect—who died during an altercation with police—should not receive the same consideration and respect at the funeral as other crime victims. This person also believed a negatively written communication to the immediate surviving family member was appropriate.

Grace and mercy for UVCs

Once a UVC situation occurs, it presents a unique challenge and opportunity for Christians in a community upended by a heinous crime.

Grace and mercy are not the responsibility of the criminal justice system.

With the real and perceived gap between UVCs and the community, Christians must be examples of compassionate understanding. Doing so helps to minimize potential delinquency and adult antisocial behaviors resulting from marginalization due to a family member's criminal actions.

How often does the community or members of a congregation reach out and offer heartfelt condolences to UVCs?

Recently, a suspect was shot and killed after wounding a police officer and a civilian. An elected official sent well-wishes to the injured and condolences to the family of the suspect. The elected official was requested to explain offering condolences to the family of the deceased suspect. The official said the UVC lost a loved one, good or bad, and questioned how and why society avidly objects to showing sympathy for the loss of a family member regardless of the situation.

Christians are obligated to care for UVCs

As Christians, we cannot wait for directives or imperatives from academic research or criminal justice policy implementations to determine the potential adverse outcomes of the lack of support for UVCs. Scripture is our directive. Proverbs 10:12 states, "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins."

As members of the family of Christ, we forego an opportunity to witness to, welcome and love these unnamed victims of crime if we hold them guilty for the actions of a family member.

As we do with crime victims, we should follow the model of eliminating questions of "why" or "why didn't you?" Instead, we should inquire what we can do or how we can help UVCs move forward. How can we, as Christians,

meet the needs of this underserved population?

As Christians, we should be available and willing helpers, while simultaneously standing as a frontline of defense for these families.

Isaiah's commission always has resonated with me: "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send Me'" (Isaiah 6:8)

I was the primary investigator on the capital murder investigation mentioned at the beginning of this article. That call was instrumental in changing my perception of unnamed victims of crime and their alienation within the community.

What might change your perception of them?

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[Click here](#) to read the full "Justice looks like..." series.