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Centering Youth Voice in Juvenile Justice Reform: New Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Publication

This report summarizes the results of focus groups with youth who had previous contact with the juvenile justice system and highlights their experiences with the police, the courts, detention, and probation. The goal of this report is to raise up youth voice, so it is central to policy decision making and juvenile justice reform efforts.

Providence, RI (December 8, 2022): Rhode Island KIDS COUNT will release its newest publication, *Centering Youth Voice in Juvenile Justice Reform*, on Friday, December 9, 2022, from 3:30 p.m. – 5:00 p.m. at The Rhode Island Foundation. Featured speakers will include **Paige Clausius-Parks**, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and **Kelsey Bala**, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Policy Analyst. Bala will share findings from the publication.

Reflections will be shared from the following panel: **Kevin Aucoin** and **Larome Myrick** of the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth & Families; **Kevin Richard** of the Rhode Island Family Court; **Beth Bixby** of Tides Family Services; **Sean Swepson**, parent, **Susan Gale**, and **youth who participated in the focus groups**.

The Juvenile Justice System

The juvenile justice system is responsible for ensuring community safety by promoting positive youth development and recognizing that the needs of children and adolescents in the justice system are different than adults. **Without that recognition that children and youth have unique needs or will understand and respond differently than adults, we miss a huge opportunity to rehabilitate and promote the future well-being of our youth and communities.**

Grounding Ourselves in Brain Development

It is well known that during adolescence, the frontal cortex – the part of the brain that controls reasoning, weighs consequences, and helps youth consider the implications of their behavior – is still developing. This ongoing brain development means that adolescents make decisions and solve problems differently than adults. Adolescents are more likely to be impulsive, misread social and emotional situations, get into accidents and fights, and engage in risk-taking behaviors. With guidance and support from parents and caring adults, most adolescents will grow out of these behaviors as their brain develops. Unfortunately, many adolescents are not afforded the opportunity to grow out of their neurodevelopmentally-typical behaviors without encountering the juvenile justice system.

Amplifying Youth Voice: Focus Groups

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is committed to amplifying youth voice so youth can lead on policies that directly impact their lives and futures. With this commitment in mind, in December 2021, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT planned and conducted focus groups with youth who had come in contact with the juvenile justice system to learn about their experiences, hear how youth think the juvenile justice system can be improved, and what services, supports, or system changes could have prevented them from entering this system in the first place. The overarching goal was to raise up youth voice in Rhode Island so it is central to policy decision making and juvenile justice reform efforts.

To identify youth who had previous contact with the juvenile justice system, we partnered with Tides Family Services, a non-profit organization that provides community-based juvenile justice, child welfare, and behavioral health services to children and families throughout Rhode Island.

- We held two focus groups, one that included four boys and another that included five girls. The boys' focus group was led by a male facilitator and the girls' by a female facilitator.
- We had a total of nine participants across both groups, and they ranged in age from 14 to 21 but the majority were 15 or 16 years old.
- Forty-five percent of our sample identified as Black or African American; 33% identified as having two or more races; and 22% identified as Hispanic or Latino. There were no participants who identified their race as white.
- Eight of our participants were from Providence and one was from Pawtucket.

Youth were asked about:

- Their experiences interacting with the police and if they had ever been arrested
- Their experiences with the Rhode Island Family Court or juvenile hearing boards
- Their experiences at the Rhode Island Training School, on probation, and in community placements
- How they think their race or ethnicity affected their experience with the juvenile justice system
- What could have prevented them from entering the juvenile justice system

We studied the responses and identified key themes and highlighted quotes from youth that best illustrated these themes. **We hope that these findings help inform juvenile justice reform efforts and ensure that youth voice is at the center of decision making.**

- **Policing:** Page 4
 - A majority of youth expressed that they feel nervous, uncomfortable, or that they act differently around police. Even if they know they have done nothing wrong to prompt a police intervention, the anxiety of police presence weighed heavily on them.
 - Some of the earliest memories youth had of police interaction involved violence and maltreatment.

- **Family Court, Juvenile Hearing Boards:** Page 5
 - Overall, youth felt very intimidated by the whole process and like they did not understand the process and did not have a voice in their own case.
 - None of the youth who participated in the focus groups had even heard of a Juvenile Hearing Board.
- **The Rhode Island Training School:** Page 6
 - Youth felt that being detained in a secure facility forced them to grow up quickly.
 - Many youth felt that confinement impacted their mental health.
- **Prevention:** Page 7
 - Youth felt that the lack of structured and enriching out-of-school time activities available to them drew them to negative activity that got them into trouble.
 - Youth also asked for more workforce training and employment opportunities and more adult role models that look like them and come from their neighborhoods.
- **Racism:** Page 8
 - When given the opportunity to reflect on how/if they believed their race or ethnicity impacted their juvenile justice system involvement, youth described experiencing racism in encounters with policing and the system.

"I am so moved by the insights of these courageous young people. We thank them for sharing their stories so bravely and for bringing their voices and experiences to the light of day so we can all learn from them and be moved to action," said Paige Clausius-Parks, Executive Director.

Input Sessions

In addition to the focus groups, we held three separate input sessions with parents, caseworkers of justice-involved youth, and another sample of youth. Please see pages 9 and 10 for their insight.

- These youth agreed that racism is a huge issue that impacted their experience with the justice system, and that they really wanted to have a different court experience.
- Our parent participant emphasized that hearing the experiences of youth is essential because their voice is often lost. The parent expressed that engaging youth, as well as their family, in the process will help youth be more successful after system involvement.
- Caseworkers stated that the way the system currently functions unfortunately provides greater opportunities for trauma than for rehabilitation, and that there was major disconnection between systems.

Kelsey Bala, Policy Analyst, emphasized the value of this report that centers youth voice, saying "Youth with lived experience have not only told us what they felt was wrong with the system but also offered their own solutions." The report's recommendations were derived from these.

Recommendations

Children and youth are not "little" adults, and we know they think and respond differently to situations than adults do. A successful juvenile justice system prioritizes prevention, diversion, and if system involvement is necessary, an environment that promotes rehabilitation and restorative justice. Please see page 11 for a full list of recommendations, including:

- Address the trauma many youth have experienced and continue to experience.
- Eliminate the school-to-prison pipeline.
- Create more opportunities for restorative justice practices.
- Examine and address racial and ethnic disparities at all points in the juvenile justice system.
- Prioritize methods to recruit and retain People of Color to work in all areas of the juvenile justice system.
- Address unequal access to legal representation.
- Institute a minimum age restriction at the Rhode Island Training School through policy reform.
- Codify policies that prohibit the questioning of a minor without their parent/guardian, or lawyer present.
- Institute reforms at the Rhode Island Family Court for youth cases.
- Provide free and accessible opportunities for youth to participate in a variety of recreational, educational, and workforce development opportunities in the community.

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a statewide children's policy organization that works to improve the health, economic well-being, safety, education, and development of Rhode Island children with a core focus on equity.