

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/without-youth-voices-there-can-be-no-youth-justice>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

JaVaune Jackson, member of the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice Youth Advisory Board

Over the last 20 years, juvenile justice policymakers and practitioners have made strides in designing systems that better support kids and families. Yet too often, these systems continue to make decisions for youth and families without their input.

Thankfully, this thinking is changing. The field is beginning to realize that in order to see true transformation, it is critical to partner with youth and their families. It's crucial to give them a voice in the changes that affect them.

There are lots of ways to achieve this goal. Vera's Center on Youth Justice employs a range of strategies that place youth and families front and center, from involving youth in the collection and analysis of data, to training youth as community researchers to conduct interviews, to creating advisory bodies that drive more effective practices and policies for all youth.

Illinois provides one example of how this works in practice. Since 2015, Vera has partnered with the state's Department of Juvenile Justice to create an Aftercare system—a adaptation of parole that takes the lessons of the youth it serves to heart, using their experiences to improve the policies and practices that inform its day-to-day work. One key facet of this endeavor has been the creation of a youth advisory board.

Twenty-one-year-old JaVaune Jackson's participation in the Illinois Youth Advisory Board has been powerful. The Youth Advisory Board has been able to improve how Aftercare specialists approach youth when trying to get to know them and figure out what they may or may not need, Jackson says. Overall, we helped the Aftercare system move away from a focus on supervision and shift[ed] their focus to supporting youth to reach their goals and build and strengthen the support in their lives. It's all about building trust. It's about connection, Jackson continues. If a youth doesn't have a good relationship with you, they won't believe you have their best interest at heart and they won't trust you.

Providing the space and opportunity for justice systems to learn from the experiences of young people like JaVaune is proving to be a fundamental piece of effective youth justice. His comments are a reminder that in the justice reform process, systems must never lose sight of the youth and families they serve. Those voices—and their wisdom and knowledge—can spur system improvement and innovations sometimes in novel ways that wouldn't have been considered otherwise.

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