

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/families-seeking-change>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

In 2001, my 13-year-old son, Corey, was sent to a facility in Louisiana that the *New York Times* called the worst juvenile prison in the country. What crime had he committed that earned him this hellish journey? He stole a \$300 stereo from a pick-up truck after he smashed the window with a crowbar. His sentence was five years in one of the most brutal facilities in the United States.

The families of children who are system-involved are often thought of as lazy, uneducated, uncaring, and worse. [*Families Unlocking Futures: Solutions to the Crisis in Juvenile Justice*](#), a new report released this week by [Justice for Families](#) (J4F), gives us a much different picture of families and relies on substantial data rather than outdated tough-on-crime rhetoric. I was given a second chance to make different decisions for my youngest daughter, nearly seven years later. Today, she is in her second semester of college, having earned a 3.7 GPA in her first semester. Despite an arrest early in her life, she has never again been involved in the system. Sadly, for my son, that second chance never came. Today, he is living on taxpayer money, serving a 12-year sentence in a state prison.

In 20 sites across eight states, Justice for Families, the [Data Center](#) and our local partners, led by families of kids involved in the system, conducted two dozen focus groups and took exhaustive surveys of more than a 1,000 families who were involved in the juvenile justice system. We conducted a media review that looked at hundreds of articles discussing families and juvenile justice. Last, we conducted an extensive literature review of promising approaches used by community-based organizations and youth-serving systems including education, mental health, child welfare, and juvenile justice. Families designed the focus group and survey questions and collected and analyzed the data, proving that families are capable, they do care, and they do, indeed, want to be involved.

With my sons involvement in the juvenile justice system, I joined the ranks of families nationwide that have no voice in the care and treatment of their children and even less say in the processes and mechanisms of the system. Seventy-nine percent of families surveyed reported that they were never asked by a probation officer what should happen to their loved one. Another astonishing 86 percent reported never being consulted by the family court judge. In addition, 92 percent of families surveyed wanted to be more engaged in local, state, and federal policy discussions regarding how juvenile justice systems work and the kinds of programs that are available. This data and the analysis that followed certainly debunk the myth that we don't care.

Incarceration of young people is bad public policy, draining resources from the very solutions that offer young people a shot at a successful future, while also increasing recidivism rates and decreasing public safety for all of us. Please join us in our efforts to end the caging of children.

Grace Bauer is the co-director of Justice for Families.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.