

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/rss-feed-unaccompanied-youth-voice-their-struggle-for-identity-and-inclusion>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Last year, attention surrounding unaccompanied youth reached a fevered pitch. Traveling alone and often fleeing escalating violence in their home countries, unaccompanied youth and undocumented minors under the age of 18 who are in the United States without a parent or legal guardian to provide them with care or custody became front page news. By the end of the fiscal year, [nearly 70,000 youth had been apprehended by immigration authorities](#) at the U.S.-Mexican border. As a range of politicians, advocates, and pundits weighed in on this record-breaking influx of youth and what to do with them, some important voices were missing from these conversations: those of the youth themselves.

In partnership with the Feerick Center for Social Justice at Fordham Law School, [Vera researchers set out to learn more](#) about these youth by interviewing them about their experiences living as unaccompanied minors in New York City. Led by two formerly unaccompanied youth/young adults who have since obtained legal status and hired as peer researchers, unaccompanied youth became more than just research subjects; they became active members of the research team, engaged in all facets of the project. [The peer researchers' expertise](#) cultivated not through advanced degrees or years of work experience, but through personal histories and direct contact with the very issues at the heart of the project proved invaluable. They helped us determine which questions to ask during interviews with other unaccompanied youth and how to ask them, gained the trust of very hesitant, fearful participants, and encouraged them to open up about their experiences.

The stories the youth told us revealed their vulnerability. Subject to discrimination and stigmatization, their individual identities were stripped away in favor of labels like undocumented and illegal, which negatively defined interactions with the world around them. Marginalization was used as justification for denying youth access to basic social services. One youth spoke of becoming homeless; another was told by a teacher to give up on school altogether in the face of limited opportunities for higher education. Overwhelmingly, youth expressed a desire to meaningfully contribute to society, if only given the opportunity to do so.

This work culminated in an April convening held at New York Law School and attended by government officials, practitioners, and researchers from a variety of social service systems. Bravely sharing their personal experiences and expertise with the audience, the peer researchers and several unaccompanied youth played central roles, helping facilitate discussion groups in conjunction with city government officials and other key stakeholders. A rare gathering of individuals not accustomed to meeting together, the event sparked lively discussions, creative recommendations, and possible solutions to the problems plaguing unaccompanied youth in New York City.

Reflecting on his experiences living as an unaccompanied youth, one participant told researchers, I came here alone with three little suitcases. I am the only one who is going to be there for me in the end. As a society, it is our obligation to work towards ensuring that other children and youth never come to share this perspective.

All of Vera's work, whether dealing with immigration or mass incarceration, strives to improve the lives of marginalized, vulnerable populations. This project and the success of the convening highlighted by a standing ovation for the peer researchers prove the power of harnessing the voices of the very communities impacted by our work. Policy should not just affect communities; communities should be empowered to affect policy.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

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