

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/juvenile-justice-systems-still-grappling-with-legacy-of-the-superpredator-myth>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

In the 1990s, sociologists inaccurately predicted that there would be a wave of the dangerous [superpredators](#) young people capable of profound violence and different from any we as a nation had seen before, based on the pseudo-scientific idea that there were young people who simply could not be reached, and who would remain unresponsive to even the best intervention available. It caused a national panic that legislators were eager to assuage, responding with a slew of get tough policies that changed the landscape of the juvenile justice system.

Over the past 15 years, there has been growing consensus that these policies, built to respond to a crisis that never came, are doing more harm than good. Youth and family advocates, government actors, and the [philanthropic community](#) have come together to spur reforms that cut the number of youth incarcerated in the juvenile justice system by half, to a size similar to what it was before the 90s.

Many of these [reforms](#) were achieved by focusing attention on the kids who were responsible for crimes that weren't serious, such as shoplifting, but were nonetheless caught in a punitive system that labeled them delinquent, housed them in large youth prisons, and separated them from their families, their education, and their communities. Recognizing minor mistakes they also may have made as teenagers, policymakers and the broader public have been able to sympathize with these youth and make a common argument for reform.

However, there is another population of kids in the justice system, one that is usually less relatable and has thus been largely ignored by reform efforts thus far: kids who are charged with serious crimes and are often tried as adults. On January 24, 2017, Vera will be co-hosting a screening of the film, [They Call Us Monsters](#), in which four boys in a California juvenile detention facility reflect on their own experiences through the exercise of writing a screenplay. The film moves back and forth between glimpses of the past and pictures of the present; between instances of danger and scenes of playful mischief; between family narratives of trauma and the profound impact of offenses on harmed parties. These are the young people who still bear the legacy of the superpredator era. To the public, at that time, and still now, it was reasonable to forfeit the childhood of these kids and try them as adults. Happily in the years since, the nation has begun to redraw critical lines in our treatment of minors. Advances in our understanding of the [adolescent brain](#), for example, have spurred Supreme Court decisions that removed the [death penalty](#) and [life without parole](#) from the array of punishments available for minors. But despite these reforms, the country continues to try thousands of kids as adults each year.

To spur further change, Vera's work through the Center on Youth Justice assists juvenile justice systems around the country in creating developmentally-appropriate policies and programs that benefit all youth. For most of the public including policymakers youth charged with serious crimes can still easily be reduced to the worst thing they've ever done, but, as this film demonstrates, these young people are not monsters they are kids, capable of change, who deserve a second chance.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

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