

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/high-school-justice-scholars-examine-criminal-legal-system-and-hope-to-transform-it>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The U.S. criminal legal system does not deliver justice. The high school students in the Vera Institute of Justice's Justice Scholars program are spending their summer seeking a deeper understanding of the system's flaws and how they can participate in its transformation.

Justice Scholars engage with mentors who help them critically analyze the foundations of the criminal justice system in the United States. Their days are filled with speakers, field trips, group projects, and conversations. They are encouraged to think critically about values and ethics, the concept of justice, and major social issues including systemic racism and economic inequality.

Students report having their eyes opened to the horrors of mass incarceration. I had no idea that 2.3 million people were incarcerated, said Cat Hou, who is a senior at Ethical Culture Fieldston School in the Bronx. I had no idea the conditions that they had to live in and the violation of basic humanity.

Such horrific statistics are brought to light by speakers who share their firsthand experience with incarceration and long-term solitary confinement, which is commonly used in jails and prisons even though the United Nations considers it torture. It is heartbreaking, said Hou. You can't hear that and not want to make a change.

Prior to participating in the Justice Scholars Program, Max Feigelson, a senior at Bard High School Early College in Manhattan, recalls believing that the U.S. prison system was basically doing its job and keeping dangerous people off the streets. Max was surprised to learn that only a small percentage of incarcerated people have been convicted of violent crimes. In addition, the majority of people held in United States jails haven't been convicted of any crime and are simply behind bars because they can't afford to buy their freedom through bail. The whole perception of the system of as a way to stop crime is not proven by empirical data or supplemental analysis of what is happening on the streets, he said. The entire idea of it being effective has been changed for me.

Each of the 13 students is completing a passion project on a criminal legal system subject of their choosing. CJ Hibbert Jr., a senior at Brooklyn Technical High School, is studying the ways that public schools can mirror the criminal legal system through the use of no-excuse policies and other regulations that offer severe penalties for minor infractions. From the minute you enter your elementary school you are put into a system that is designed to constrain you and put you in a mindset that allows you to be well-suited for the criminal legal system and the prison system, said Hibbert, who is interested in education policy and hopes to find ways to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.

Hibbert said that the Justice Scholars program provided an opportunity for students from different backgrounds from all over the city to explore important issues together. It is really amazing, he said. It is taking all of these brilliant students with a wide variety of experiences and bringing them together to tackle a common problem.

These students entered the program having recently lived through the most profound societal reckoning with racism and police violence in a generation. There is a fire a lot of folks are feeling, said Toomi Al-Dhahi, the Justice Scholars Program instructor. Using that fire to support students in this work is to actually be investing in our future and dismantling these harmful cycles that we have been in for generations upon generations.

Hou reported being inspired and enlightened by the program. I want to use that knowledge I have been given, she said. I want to do something to make change.

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