

# Vera Institute of Justice

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/mtv-and-hernan-carvente-discuss-youth-violence-and-justice-reform>

### Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Last month, I had the distinct honor of participating in an [interview with MTV News](#), where I shared my personal story with the juvenile justice system and how that experience grounds what I believe about juvenile justice reform.

When I was 16, I was convicted of a serious offense and spent four years in a maximum-security juvenile facility. Leading up to this, I had grown up in an unstable household, where alcohol consumption and domestic violence were both regular things. I started drinking when I was eight and became involved in gang activity by the time I was 13. These experiences helped lead me down a dangerous path, and I didn't receive much help once I entered the system.

I remember being that young person who didn't understand his rights, living in facilities filled with violence where I lived in a constant state of hyper vigilance. These facilities lacked the proper resources such as adequate mental health services, a quality secondary education program, and pro-social opportunities to help my peers and me and did not create environments where healthy adolescent development could take place. I was also two and a half hours away from my community, which made it difficult for me to see my family and connect with employers, colleges, and other youth development programs that could potentially help me upon my release.

I was invited to be part of the MTV interview, because I now serve as an advisor to the [Youth First Initiative](#), a national advocacy campaign whose aim is to end youth incarceration by closing youth prisons and investing in community-based programs and alternatives to incarceration. Between my work with Youth First and other opportunities I've had since I came home including my work at Vera as a program analyst for the Center on Youth Justice, I've realized that achieving real change requires everyone to get involved in the fight. This means using all the strategies at our disposal including starting state campaigns, engaging in strategic communications, raising public awareness, and addressing gaps in policy and practice at all levels. These strategies should not only inform and persuade policymakers and educate the general public, but they should do so by intentionally and meaningfully bringing in the voices of the youth and families affected by the system. We cannot hope to achieve sustainable reform without the buy-in and feedback of those most affected. Who better to point out the faults in the system than those who have felt it first-hand?

As we were making choices about which young people to include in these reform conversations, we should be sure that we are inviting as diverse a group as possible. It wasn't that long ago that, upon being invited to tell my story, I felt like I shouldn't say I was convicted of a violent crime, because of the perception that the general public would look less favorably upon youth who committed a crime where someone got hurt, therefore stalling reform efforts.

But things are slowly changing. In both the juvenile and adult systems, the justice field is making an important shift by recognizing that if we are to truly create a justice system that serves the needs of ALL youth and families, then we cannot continue to exclude entire groups of youth because of the offenses they committed, whether violent or not. It is not just about changing how our current system works as a society we have **amoral obligation to not give up and/or throw away** our youth. The time is now to ensure that all youth have an opportunity to grow and become the future leaders of this country.

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