Youth-Led Study Proposes Solutions for a Failing Juvenile Justice System

A report by Bronx youth highlights problems in the juvenile justice system and youth-developed ideas for change

(Bronx, NY) -- A team of Bronx youth who are actively engaged with community-led efforts to keep youth free from incarceration have just released the results of their 18-month inquiry into what their peers experience in the juvenile justice system. The team of researchers are Bronx youth, under the age of 24, who have either experienced the juvenile justice system personally, or have family members and close friends who have been locked up. The young people used a form of inquiry called Participatory Action Research (PAR), which mobilizes individuals who are directly impacted by a problem to study the issue, and to generate solutions using collective inquiry with their peers.

The youth research team surveyed Bronx youth who had experienced the juvenile justice system. Some of their most startling findings are as follows:

- Only 42% of youth had their parents immediately notified after arrest
- Only 28% of youth had their parents present when questioned by the police
- 45% of youth said the programs they were sent to were not helpful
- 74% of youth coming back to the community from residential placement said they had no support in their transition home

However, young people also communicated positive solutions. Sixty-three percent of youth said they would like to be supported by other young people who had experienced the system. Seventy percent of youth said they would like to be considered in policy discussions about juvenile justice reform.

The youth who researched and wrote the report called on juvenile justice stakeholders to include young people in policy conversations. “The fact that so many of us want to engage in policy discussions despite our negative experiences with the system shows that we are unafraid and unashamed to speak truth to power,” said DeVanté Lewis, 24, one of the report’s authors. “We often hear adults perpetuate a false narrative about young people in the justice system, saying that we just don’t care,” said Darius Hills, 22, one of the youth researchers. “Nothing could be further from the truth. We want to participate in making effective changes
for our communities.” Charles Hudgins, 25, a youth researcher and mentor who was incarcerated at Rikers Island at the age of 16, echoed these sentiments: “Failure to engage us in these discussions in meaningful ways will only produce more failed attempts to reform a broken juvenile justice system.”

New York’s juvenile justice system leaders are listening. Commissioner Gladys Carrión of the NYC Administration for Children’s Services (ACS), which oversees detention and placement facilities for juveniles in New York City, acknowledged the need for a change in approach. “For too long, our communities and children have been seen as the problem,” said Commissioner Carrión. “However these families and communities are assets that we need to support and embrace to achieve better outcomes for children.” Commissioner Ana Bermúdez of the NYC Department of Probation agreed: “We welcome input from the young people that we serve, and from their families,” said Commissioner Bermúdez. “While we have come a long way, learning directly from our young people will help us continue to refine our practices, offer more targeted and appropriate supports, and thus improve outcomes for these 'at-promise' youth." Commissioners from both agencies will attend the release of the report and dialogue with young people on Wednesday, February 23rd in the Bronx.

The complete report, titled “Support Not Punish: Participatory Action Research Report”, accompanied by dynamic art exhibit featuring young people wearing T-Shirts communicating the statistics gleaned from the research, will be unveiled at community event on Wednesday, February from 5:30 to 8:00 PM at the Bronx Art Space, located at 305 E. 140th Street in the Mott Haven neighborhood of the Bronx. The report will be available for download online at: http://cc-fy.org/par-report-release/.

The report, funded by a grant from the New York Foundation, is being published by two community-based organizations in the Bronx that work with system-involved youth. Community Connections for Youth (CCFY) is a non-profit organization whose mission is to empower grassroots faith and neighborhood organizations to develop effective community-driven alternatives to incarceration for youth. United Playaz of New York is a violence prevention organization that is dedicated to promoting peace and empowering youth to contribute positively and participate fully in their communities.