


# A New Vision for Youth Justice

## INSIGHTS FROM HAMPTON ROADS COMMUNITIES

RISE FOR YOUTH
UNITED FAMILIES, SAFE COMMUNITIES

# Executive Summary

The Commonwealth of Virginia is in the midst of a transformation of its juvenile justice system. The Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) has closed the Beaumont Juvenile Correctional Center (JCC), proposed closure of the Bon Air JCC, and presented a Transformation Plan that includes two new youth prisons and a statewide continuum of community-based alternative placements and services. However, a proposal by DJJ and the City of Chesapeake to construct a 112-bed Joint Juvenile Justice Center encountered significant community opposition in late 2017, and DJJ ultimately withdrew the plan. In voicing opposition to the proposed Chesapeake prison, community members expressed the belief that Virginia should invest even more resources in prevention services and alternatives to incarceration, and that Virginia should replace large, outdated prisons with small, home-like settings for the small population of young people who made need secure care. Community members remarked that they lacked meaningful opportunities to weigh in on DJJ's Transformation plan and felt blindsided by the proposal to build a new, large youth prison.

The communities of Hampton Roads have some of the highest rates of youth incarceration in the Commonwealth. The residents of Hampton Roads—particularly those most affected by youth incarceration—must have a voice if Virginia's juvenile justice system transformation is to be successful. In September and October of 2017, RISE for Youth, a nonpartisan coalition in support of community alternatives to youth incarceration, held a series of community visioning sessions across Hampton Roads to answer this question: What do young people need to avoid justice system involvement and to lead successful lives?

The communities of Hampton Roads have some of the highest rates of youth incarceration in the Commonwealth.




## About RISE for Youth

RISE for Youth is a nonpartisan campaign in support of community alternatives to youth incarceration. Our goals are to increase the likelihood that youth will become law-abiding adults by investing in community-based alternatives to juvenile justice system involvement; reduce the number of youth arrested, referred, under the supervision of the Department of Juvenile Justice or committed to the Department of Juvenile Justice; close Virginia's juvenile prisons and re-invest savings from their closure into evidence-informed, community-based alternatives that will keep youth at home with their families and communities and keep communities safer; and build a true continuum of evidence-informed placements for youth that cannot safely remain in their homes.

Community members offered sharp insight, and many common themes emerged from these conversations, including:

**Prevention**—reaching youth before they have committed an offense;

**Support for parents**—including young parents, working parents, and fathers—in efforts to prevent youth incarceration;

**Addressing the lasting impacts** of justice system involvement;

**Employment services** to help community members become self-sufficient; and

Recognition of the **range of strategies** necessary to support young people.

While this report summarizes the collective vision of community members in Hampton Roads, unique needs were identified in each community RISE visited.

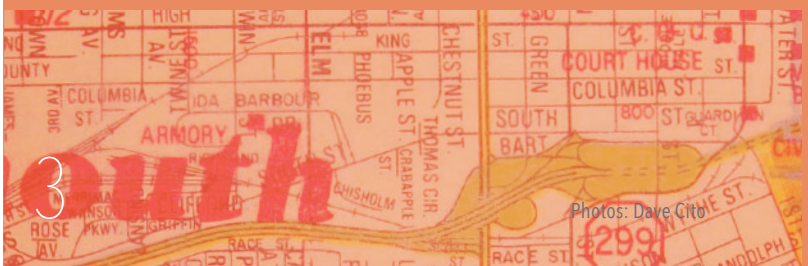
In **Newport News**, community members pointed to a lack of sufficient community-based programs and other resources that can prevent youth from getting into trouble and a lack of access to economic opportunity and employment. They also highlighted Virginia's overspending to incarcerate individuals and not enough investment in basic community needs.

In **Norfolk**, community members raised the need for youth to have access to supportive adults, such as mentors from their communities, or mentors who have had similar past experiences. They shared concerns about law enforcement officers being "first responders" to traumatized youth. They want law enforcement officers to receive mental health/crisis intervention training and to see more members of their own communities entering law enforcement.

In **Chesapeake**, the community identified a need for more family support and other services so that problems could be "nipped in the bud from the beginning," including youth development and mentorship programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters of Hampton Roads. A community member remarked that "there aren't nearly enough [of these programs] to go around."

Youth and community members from impacted community areas are the best experts on local public safety needs. The community vision outlined in this report provides the basis for RISE for Youth's recommendation to the Department of Juvenile Justice to invite impacted community voices to the planning table to provide insight and recommendations for Virginia's juvenile justice transformation.

Youth and community members from impacted community areas are the best experts on local public safety needs.




Photos: Dave Cito

# Introduction

## ENVISIONING ALTERNATIVES TO INCARCERATION

The insights of Hampton Roads communities are well aligned with public sentiment across the Commonwealth. According to a GBA Strategies poll on youth justice reform, released in February 2017, 80% of Virginians favor keeping young people out of harmful, ineffective prisons. According to poll results, Virginians overwhelmingly prefer alternatives to incarceration that are proven to lead to better outcomes. The survey of over 500 adults found that:

**91%** support treatment and rehabilitation plans that include a youth's family in planning and services;

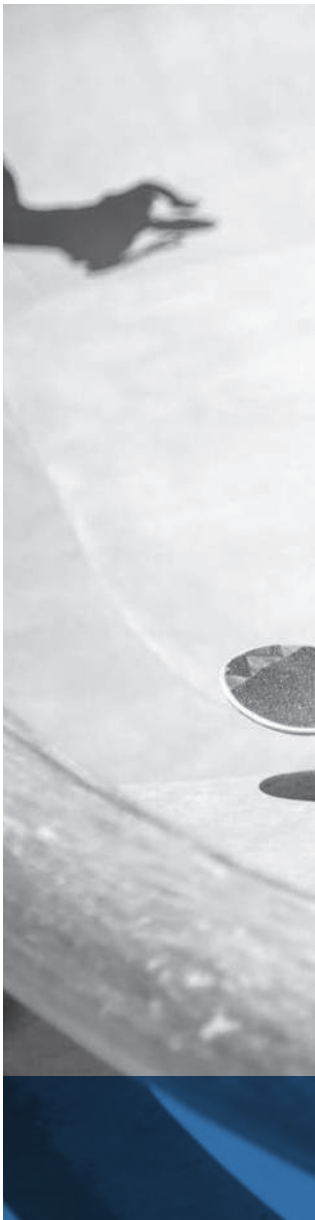
**89%** support providing financial incentives for states and municipalities to invest in alternatives to youth incarceration, such as intensive rehabilitation, education, job training, community services, and programs that provide youth the opportunity to repair harm to victims and communities; 78% support requiring states to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in the youth justice system; and

**77%** support increasing funding to provide more public defenders to represent children in court.

During September and October of 2017, RISE for Youth, a statewide, nonpartisan coalition in support of community alternatives to youth incarceration, held a series of community visioning sessions throughout Hampton Roads. Each event provided community members the opportunity to express their vision for community alternatives to incarceration.

RISE for Youth held the first visioning session as part of Fuse Fest, an intergenerational festival celebrating urban life in Norfolk. The second visioning session also took place in Norfolk, and the third in Chesapeake. The town hall was held in Newport News. RISE for Youth co-hosted three of the four events with Teens With a Purpose, a Norfolk and Newport News-based teen leadership organization, and the Boys & Girls Clubs of Southeast Virginia co-hosted the fourth. Participants were residents of Chesapeake, Norfolk, Virginia Beach, Portsmouth, and Newport News, and ranged in age from children to seniors. Attendees brought an array of experiences that could inform possible alternatives to incarceration, including having been incarcerated, serving as a juvenile probation officer, working in the legal system, working with youth in community-based programs, and being parents of teens or pre-teens.





**7x**

Black youth in Virginia are seven times more likely than white youth to be incarcerated.

**2.5x**

Latino youth are almost 2.5 times more likely than white youth to be incarcerated.

At each visioning session, community members engaged in a "walk through the system" to highlight the staggering racial disparities in Virginia's rates of youth incarceration. According to reports released by The Sentencing Project in September and October 2017, black youth in Virginia are seven times more likely than white youth to be incarcerated; and Latino youth are almost 2.5 times more likely than white youth to be incarcerated. The disparities continue to grow, making Virginia an outlier nationally: racial disparities between black and white youth in custody in Virginia have increased 68% since 2001, which is three times the national rate of increase.

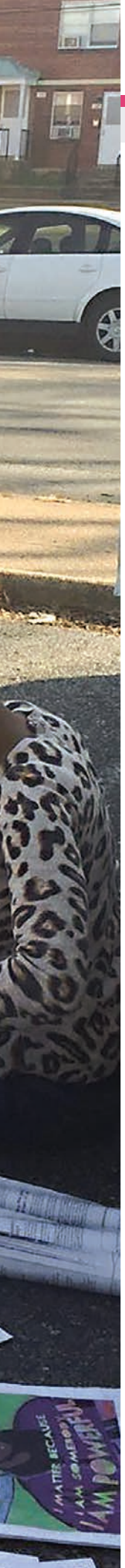
Community members also heard the story of one or more youth involved in the juvenile justice system. The group then engaged in discussion about what could have prevented the young person from getting to this point, as well as what could help the youth safely and successfully transition out of the justice system and into adulthood. Given the different communities and individual backgrounds and experiences of participants, participants raised a variety of considerations and suggestions. Across all sessions, however, community members lifted up several points of agreement, discussed below.






*Make the resources available to parents, don't make them dig or have to know the right person [to get help].*

*It's very easy to get into the system, [but] you don't know what you are up against until you are in it.*





# Community Insight

Community members overwhelmingly expressed a need for programs to support youth before they become involved in the juvenile justice system. Visioning session participants told us that prevention and local resources —not youth prisons—are what their youth need to thrive.

At Fuse Fest, a local juvenile probation officer explained that many programs in Virginia cannot serve youth and families until they have an open DJJ case.

Participants at Fuse Fest also said that programming should be offered to all youth (e.g., interventions that support victims of bullying, but also help the bullies address the underlying causes of their behavior), and should take place both within and outside of schools.

In Norfolk, participants felt youth need access to supportive adults, such as mentors from their communities or mentors who have had similar past experiences.

Norfolk community members expressed concerns about law enforcement being "first responders" to traumatized youth. They want law enforcement officers to receive mental health/crisis intervention training, and want to see more members of their own communities entering law enforcement.

In Chesapeake, community members shared that they wanted their young people to have family support and other services so that problems could be "nipped in the bud from the beginning."

Several participants mentioned specific programs available in the area, but many audience members did not know of any programs. One Chesapeake participant said she had heard of a good re-entry program, but it was in Norfolk, and if you live in Chesapeake, you don't qualify to participate. One community member encapsulated the spirit of the room, saying, "if there are resources, we don't even know about them. Make the resources available to parents, don't make them dig or have to know the right person [to get help]."

Visioning session participants noted that many young people do not even view schools as safe spaces, when schools should be helping to address the issues that lead young people to become involved in the justice system.

Participants also felt that youth should be given an opportunity to learn about how the system works before they actually become involved in it, in order to help them make better choices. As one participant put it, "it's very easy to get into the system, [but] you don't know what you are up against until you are in it."

## SUPPORT FOR PARENTS

Many session participants discussed the importance of including and supporting parents in efforts to prevent the incarceration of youth.

One Fuse Fest participant said that he supported offering wraparound services and evidence-based interventions like Aggression Replacement Training, a research-based intervention for aggressive youth, which teaches youth social skills, how to deal with anger, and moral reasoning, but said that, "you need to offer all of these services to the whole family if you want to make progress."

In Norfolk, participants commented that family members may also need education about how to deal with mental health crises, bullying, and other challenges.

Several community members attending Fuse Fest felt that their communities need more programs to support fathers and help them be there for their kids. One young woman said that her father leaving her life when she was young, after he was evicted from his apartment, was a major source of trauma for her. Although she benefited greatly from participating in a girls group that helped her address the impact that experience had on her, she would rather see fathers supported so they do not have to leave.

### A Walk Through the System

Participants at each session watched volunteers engage in an activity simulating a "walk through the juvenile justice system," by rolling dice to determine their outcomes. Rolling certain numbers required adding a quality that was associated with disparities (e.g., 3 points for being black, 2 points for being brown, 1 point for being LGBTQ), thereby increasing the likelihood of negative outcomes. When each person exited the system, they received a "bag of trauma" describing the lasting impact of incarceration on their lives (e.g., difficulty finding employment; medical issues).

Participants found the exercise eye-opening. One youth explained that it helped to illustrate "how it's sheer luck how things will go for you, and the things you will have when you leave the system," while another said it showed how the system really was a "roll of the dice." One volunteer described the walk through the system as "surreal" and said the experience felt "futile." A Chesapeake community member commented that the exercise was "very accurate" and illustrated why we need a system of law enforcement and justice that does not involve "profiling" youth and treating them worse because they are black, brown or LGBTQ



Photos: Deb Markham





Participants highlighted the importance of working with young people to identify what they need. One man explained that through volunteering with Teens With a Purpose, he's learned that "it's a mistake trying to solve a problem with no young people involved," and that "we need to ask young people what they want," and keep an open mind when they tell us.

A community member in Chesapeake expressed concern that "when both parents have to work, they need [community programs] because when kids are left to their own devices they can get into gangs and trouble."

Participants also emphasized support for young parents. One Fuse Fest participant said, "a mom trying to defend her kids' behavior in school may only be 19 herself," while a Chesapeake attendee asked why social services and other supports were never offered to the two young parents in the story presented at that session.

## The Impact of Trauma on Youth

Most-system involved youth have had Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which are traumatic experiences, such as abuse or neglect, or witnessing violence, that occur before the age of 18. Overall in Virginia, 1 in 5 children have 2 ACEs before age 18, and rates are much higher for young people who come into contact with the juvenile justice system. ACEs are cumulative and interconnected and have been linked to poorer health outcomes later in life, such as a higher risk of stroke or heart disease.

That trauma can manifest as inability to focus, disinterest, or being on "high alert." This can lead to trouble in school and with law enforcement for young people who are simply reacting to past abuse. Kate McCord of the Virginia Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Action Alliance explained in a presentation at the Norfolk visioning session that the way we try to understand youth behavior informs our responses, saying, "If you think of kids as needing help, rather than as noncompliant, then you ask 'What's happened to you? 'What's going on?' rather than 'What's wrong with you?'"

Photos: Dave Cito

## ADDRESS THE LASTING IMPACTS OF JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT

Every visioning session included discussion about the poor outcomes for individuals who have experienced incarceration.

At Fuse Fest, a man who was incarcerated as a young adult shared that when he went to prison, nothing was done for his trauma, so it continued to build, and he went home having experienced more trauma. He said that during his five years of incarceration, "I realized was that everyone around me was a reflection of me," adding that the "prison will create an environment we will dwell in and allow negatives to permeate so that it becomes second nature."

A young woman attending Fuse Fest explained that her brother entered the juvenile justice system for stealing a bike, and after his experiences there, he is now a paraplegic and will be released from prison soon after serving time for a murder conviction. She said her family's experiences have taught her that, "these jails don't work, we need something else."

In Chesapeake, many participants expressed fears that, after becoming involved with the juvenile justice system, young people are set up for failure no matter what happens next. One woman commented that "kids who grow up in jail don't know how to act or function in the outside world." Another person said, "whether you're rehabilitated or not, you are stamped with that stamp, and you always will be." This led many community members to express their hope that Virginia could improve its policies and practices on expungement of juvenile records.

Chesapeake participants expressed a need for more resources for individuals transitioning out of incarceration, so that they can successfully "get back into society, and have hope." One community member noted the importance of a high school diploma so youth can apply to college, and "not just have a trade."

Participants felt that mental health care was essential because, as one woman explained, "just being incarcerated, they have issues they didn't have when they went in there."

*I realized was that everyone around me was a reflection of me.*

*Kids who grow up in jail don't know how to act or function in the outside world.*

## EMPLOYMENT RESOURCES

While the focus of the visioning sessions was on specific juvenile justice issues, the broader theme of economic security was pronounced as well. Community members strongly supported employment-related services as part of a continuum of services that should be offered instead of incarceration. One young man said, "We need subsidized employment so both of the young people [in the case scenario shared] would have something better to do with their time."

Pointing to the example of another organization participating in Fuse Fest, one young man said, "learning gardening and agriculture teaches you patience, teaches you how to feed yourself. It helps the community and the environment, and helps you fend for yourself so you don't have to steal."

*Learning gardening and agriculture teaches you patience, teaches you how to feed yourself.*

Another young man explained that, "a lot of times we have to work two or three jobs just to maintain a household, so our children are learning from peers and TV."

Several other participants talked about how the financial health and needs of families can impact young people. Examples shared ranged from parents being unable to always "be there" for their children because they need to earn enough to support a household, to families being unable to pay for needed services, such as mental health counseling.








## THE NEED FOR A RANGE OF RESPONSES

Participants at each session also recognized that even with better prevention services in place, some young people will still enter the juvenile justice system. They felt that different young people will need different services, pointing to models that included therapy and treatment for substance abuse and other issues.

One woman noted that there may still be some young people who require a secure environment, and the group discussed the fact that this could be accomplished without using an adult-like prison facility.

In Norfolk, several people talked about the importance of mental health services availability, and in their written responses, almost every person identified the need for some type of mental health intervention (e.g., trauma-focused counseling, individual or family therapy).

Faith was also an important part of the discussion. Some attendees said that tending to the spiritual health of youth and families was important, while others shared their personal story of how faith-based programs helped them make positive changes in their lives.

In each visioning session, participants were encouraged to submit a worksheet listing the alternatives to incarceration that they thought would be most useful to the young people whose stories were shared or to the youth in their community, generally. The alternatives listed below were among the most frequently mentioned.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Anger management therapy | Subsidized employment | Trauma-informed care |
| Life skills coaching | Anti-bullying programs | Restorative justice |
| Family substance abuse treatment | Prevention and early intervention | Community mentors |




Photo: Dave Cito

## POETIC JUSTICE TOWN HALL

Youth Voice

In addition to hosting community visioning sessions, RISE for Youth also co-hosted the Poetic Justice Town Hall, along with Teens With a Purpose in Newport News on October 27, 2017. Young people involved in the juvenile justice system have the same hopes and dreams as other young people in Virginia. Yet the circumstances that led these youth to become involved with the justice system, the experiences they have while incarcerated and separated from their families and communities, and the lasting effects of a juvenile record all create barriers to becoming healthy and successful adults.

During the Poetic Justice Town Hall, young people shared poems about their lives and communities, and community members were invited to respond to the poetry. During the evening, the youth raised several themes:

**Schools should be a safe and supportive place for all students.** This means ensuring that students are safe from harassment and assault, supporting students in body and mind, and ending overly harsh discipline practices that feed the school-to-prison pipeline. One student shared that in their school, a student would be disciplined for dropping a stapler out of a classroom window, but not for bullying a student based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.

**Communities need more resources for youth development.** Youth expressed that Virginia currently spends large sums of money to incarcerate individuals and not enough on basic community needs. One town hall participant shared, "In our communities, it's dark, and in other areas it's light," explaining that the street lighting varies in different parts of town. He said that this gives the perception that those neighborhoods are "dark and grim," adding, "If I wanted to commit crime, this would be my playground." Other parts of the discussion also touched on the fact that community-based programs for youth are underfunded, and many Virginia communities do not have access to opportunity and the employment that they need.

**We need new approaches to juvenile justice.** Both youth and adult community participants in the town halls recognized that there were many opportunities for improvement in Virginia. There were discussions of successful models and approaches underway on issues such as health care, and some conversation about how the candidates could support increased investment in and utilization of practices like restorative justice in Virginia.

**Youth voice is essential.** In the words of one of the event hosts, "if we want a Virginia that is fair, we need to listen to all people, including young people." The poems shared by the Teens With a Purpose members, and the comments given by the speakers, illustrated that young people who are living in Virginia's communities understand what they need to thrive, and that elected officials have much to learn from them.



Photo: Deb Markham

# Conclusion

Young people and other community members in Hampton Roads generously shared their thoughts and opinions with RISE for Youth and its partners. From them we learned that Virginia's state and local governments need to provide more prevention and supportive services so that youth can avoid juvenile justice involvement. When youth do come into contact with the justice system, they should have a chance at true rehabilitation through receiving services that allow them to remain connected to their homes and communities. Based on the input of Hampton Roads community members, a review of research on Virginia and national juvenile justice systems, and looking at successful models in other states, RISE for Youth offers the following recommendations.

RISE for Youth recommends that Virginia's Department of Juvenile Justice:

1. Modify its Transformation Plan to eliminate the construction of any new youth prisons;

2. Create community partnerships with directly impacted youth, their families, and their communities; provide more meaningful opportunities for affected communities to provide insight into the Transformation Plan; hire individuals with prior system involvement to work with system impacted and at-risk youth; and consider recommendations from directly impacted youth, their families, and their communities for programs and services for youth;

3. Identify and analyze housing options for youth in their home communities in Norfolk and Newport News for the small number of youth who may need secure care; and

4. Continue to expand the continuum of care for youth in their communities.

> When youth do come into contact with the justice system, they should have a chance at true rehabilitation...






# Acknowledgements

RISE for Youth would like to thank all families, youth, and community members who participated in the visioning sessions and town hall. A special thank you goes to Teens With a Purpose for their partnership in this work. Artwork by youth from Richmond's Juvenile Detention Center, ART 180's Youth Self-Advocacy Through Art Program 2016, www.performingstatistics.org.

"There's still time
The blood sweat and tears and the green and the land

We walk on the color of our skin or the artwork on our body they label us as gang members young and black

But we're trying to do right looking for work thinking about our future what we want to be in life

There's still time
If I was given more positive reinforcement, then I wouldn't be bored

Trying to do right

My head was stuck in the drugs the money and fines stuff I wish I could rewind
Judges, police and Commonwealth charging me as an adult

I'll probably go to the
Division of Juvenile Justice More like The Jungle heading up the road now I'm locked up my family has no home
now they in the struggle and hoping that they can look in my eyes
There's still time
And I'm trying to do right"

*– Norfolk Detention Center youth*

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