

A United Vision for a World Without Youth Prisons



NO KIDS IN PRISON

Executive Summary

On August 21st, 2019 [Cities United](#) held a national convening with all of its partners in Hampton Roads, Virginia. During this convening the [Youth First Initiative](#) and [RISE for Youth](#) were invited by [Performing Statistics](#) to conduct a visioning session with young people from different jurisdictions working with Cities United. The goal of the visioning session was to offer young people an opportunity to share their vision for what their communities could look like without youth prisons. It is a platform for young people to reflect back on their own interactions with the justice system and share what could have been done differently to ensure their success if resources were able. Below are the recommendations that stemmed from that conversation:

Recommendation #1

Invest money saved from closure of youth prisons towards economic justice and changing the economic structure for communities of color.

Recommendation #2

Invest in opportunities for young people in communities to have fun, increase access to recreation, sports programs, access to information, and to go on vacation.

Recommendation #3

Invest in mental health supports, school counselors, trauma-based clinics and health insurance for everyone.

Recommendation #4

Invest in a variety of educational opportunities that include post-secondary education, trades, and other programs tailored to the career interests of youth in communities and those currently incarcerated.

Recommendation #5

Invest in meeting the basic needs of youth, transportation, and getting rid of food deserts.

Recommendation #6

Invest in community-based alternatives to incarceration.

Recommendation #7

Hold government responsible to fund communities that have been impacted by gun violence.

Recommendation #8

Adults need to listen and talk to young people, show youth love and support, and move away from punitive responses.

Recommendation #9

Break the school-to-prison pipeline, reform suspension policies, and invest in youth and teachers.

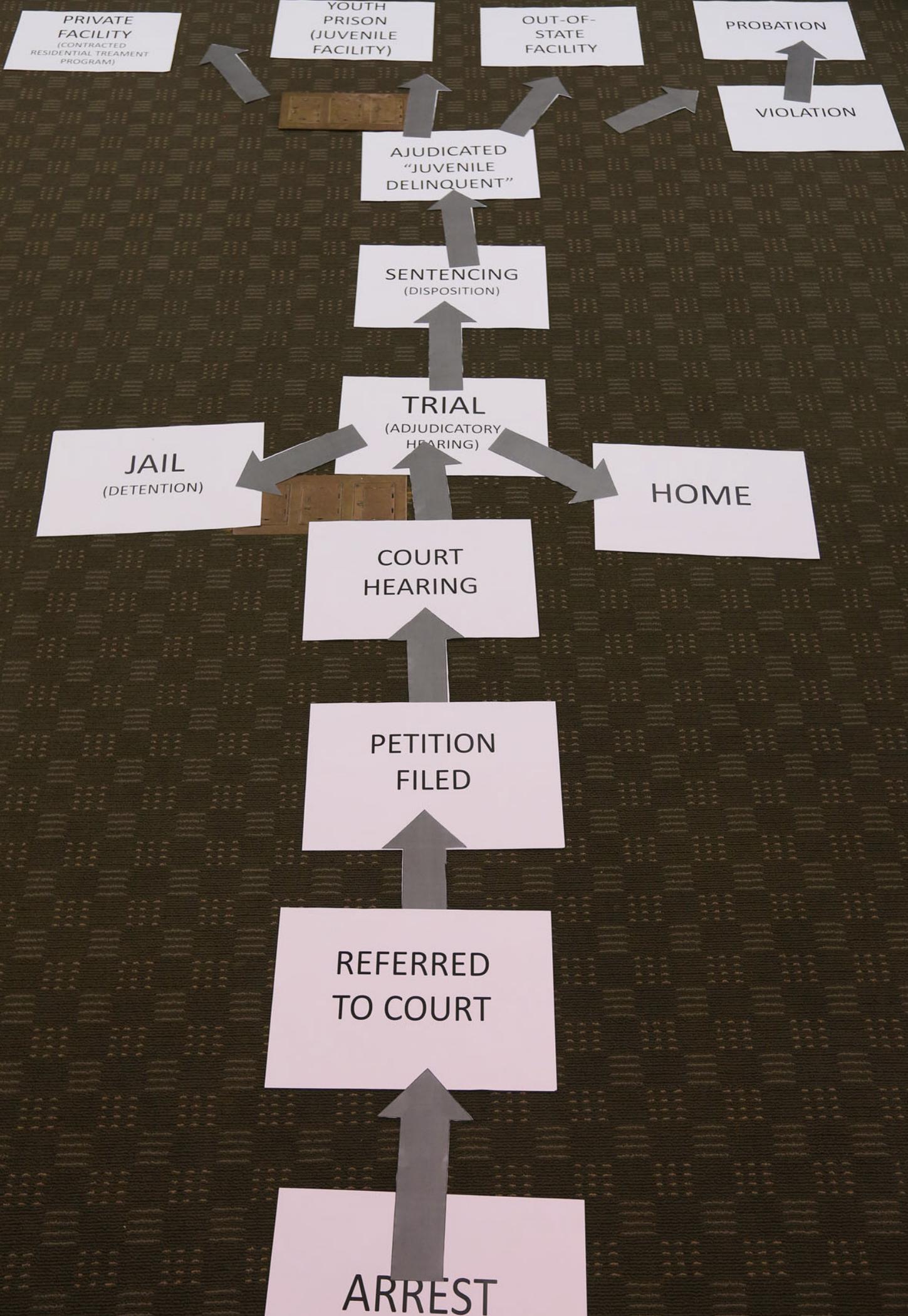
Introduction

On August 21st, 2019 [Cities United](#) held a national convening with all of its partners in Hampton Roads, Virginia. During this convening the [Youth First Initiative](#) and [RISE for Youth](#) were invited by [Performing Statistics](#) to conduct a visioning session with young people from different jurisdictions working with Cities United. The goal of the visioning session is to offer young people an opportunity to share their vision for what their communities could look like without youth prisons. It is a platform for young people to reflect back on their own interactions with the justice system and share what could have been done differently to ensure their success. Also, the visioning session offers a space for youth to think about what resources are missing from their communities and how savings from closures of prisons could be used to better support youth and families. Feedback from the visioning session can be used to inform policymakers on what the needs are of those most directly impacted.

Format of the Youth Visioning Session

The visioning session are broken down into three main components:

- 1. Ice Breaker:** The session began with an icebreaker called Seeking Common Ground. This exercise helped give everyone an opportunity to get acquainted.
- 2. Community Reinvestment Conversation:** The youth were asked questions (see below) and offered their perspectives.
- 3. A Walk Through the System:** A map of the juvenile justice system was placed on the floor with the different stages, such as arrest, court hearing, detention, trial, sentencing, probation, placement and parole. Young people were invited to stand on each step and share what happened to them as they moved through the system and discuss what different intervention or alternative approaches the system should have offered to them at these stages in the juvenile justice system.



What does community reinvestment look like?

As the convening was held in Virginia, Youth First asked young people in the room to think about what they could do with the money saved from the closure of a youth prison in Virginia. The following questions were posed to youth:

- 1. What would you do for your community with \$197,000 (cost of incarceration in Virginia for one youth per year)?**
- 2. What would you do for your community with \$50 million (approximate cost of running a youth prison in Virginia)**
- 3. What would you do for your own community/city with money saved from closing youth prisons?**

A total of 25 young people were in the room, representing 10 different cities including:

- *Hampton, VA*
- *Richmond, VA*
- *Louisville, KY*
- *Seattle, WA*
- *Tacoma, WA*
- *Flint, MI*
- *Buffalo, NY*
- *Brooklyn Park, MN*
- *Washington, DC*
- *Houston, TX*

After posing these questions, young people offered their ideas and thoughts on what investments should be made in communities not just in Virginia but in cities across the United States following the closure of a youth prison:



Recommendation #1

Invest money saved from closure of youth prisons towards economic justice and changing the economic structure for communities of color.

During the session youth emphasized the importance of investing in “affordable housing” and “job training” for young people who come into contact with the system. They also talked about the importance of making “investments in small businesses” and pushing for “job creation” in communities with an emphasis in hiring “formerly incarcerated” people and providing them with “living wages” where people can work 40 hours a week and earn at least \$50,000 a year.

Along with all of this, they also talked about the need to invest in “community infrastructure” which included fixing buildings and helping the “homeless obtain housing.” One young person went as far as to say that we should use the money to give everyone a studio apartment.

The young people in the room also discussed the importance of not just giving people jobs but also assisting them with financial literacy and being able to own homes. As one young leader stated:

“I think one thing I would add to our list of what we can do with all the money we’re saving without incarceration is skills training or possibly building out apprenticeship opportunities for individuals of all ages to learn a trade they can build from. The idea being that community members would have the skills/trades necessary to build their own businesses, wealth, and help black and brown neighborhoods to thrive economically.”



OPEN

Recommendation #2

Invest in opportunities for young people in communities to have fun, increase access to recreation, sports programs, access to information, and to go on vacation.

Throughout the session, young people talked about the need for multiple recreation options for youth in the community to keep them busy and using their energy in more fun and engaging outlets. In particular, youth talked about “investing in community centers for youth” and building “amusement parks” near every community. Several of the young people in the room felt that part of the reason that youth engage in activities that lead them into contact with the justice system is because they are bored and don’t have many options in terms of recreational opportunities in their neighborhoods. Young people felt that providing more recreation options would lead to youth having more fun and coming into less contact with law enforcement and other justice system actors.

Youth also highlighted the importance of investing in “more local libraries” so that young people in the community “have access to information” and books to be able to feed their minds in a positive way. Youth in the room expressed that you could find a liquor store more easily on every corner of a neighborhood than you could a library or other positive recreational space.

Lastly, some of the young people shared that one of the things that helped them stay on a good path was being able to “go on vacation” and explore beyond their cities and neighborhoods. This allowed them to see that there was a bigger world out there and completely changed their perspectives along with the choices that they made. That said, youth in the session suggested that some of the funds saved from closures be used to give youth opportunities to be able to get out of their neighborhoods and expose them to new and exciting opportunities.



Recommendation #3

Invest in mental health supports, school counselors, trauma-based clinics and health insurance for everyone.

Another consistent theme that came up during the visioning session was the importance of increased access to mental health resources and supports for young people in every community. One place where youth felt that we could make a more direct investment was by using funds to include more counselors in schools instead of police officers. Youth in the room talked about the over reliance of law enforcement as the response to issues happening in schools often leading to arrests instead of addressing the root causes that might be leading a young person to act out in school. Youth also highlighted the need to invest in “trauma-based clinics” and “care intervention teams” in every community “specially for those who have experienced prison.”

Youth further expressed that part of the reason that we have such a huge incarceration problem is because we respond to people who need mental health support by sending them to prison instead of offering them mental resources and connections in the community. That said, youth in the room suggested that their be direct investments into “mental health centers filled with experts who [would help people], not just diagnose them.” They also strongly urged that investments be made to help young people and other members of the community obtain “cheaper rehab” options and pointed to the need for policy changes that would “fix access to [existing] centers.” Lastly, because of the huge costs of healthcare, which often includes mental health services, young people in the session suggested that funds be used to ensure “health insurance for everyone.”



Recommendation #4

Invest in a variety of educational opportunities that include post-secondary education, trades, and other programs tailored to the career interests of youth in communities and those currently incarcerated.

Youth in the visioning session highlighted the importance of using savings from youth prison closures to offer multiple academic and “alternative career options” for youth in communities such as, “trades”, “creative arts, “theater” and the “sciences.” A particular theme that arose in the room was the need for there to be more community “programs based on the interests of youth.” Young people shared that part of the reason that youth disengage from school and other programs is because they are not interested in the material being taught. Thus, young people in the room felt that the more options available to youth in communities, the less likelihood there would be of youth dropping out of school or other supportive programs.

Furthermore, youth in the session felt that another major barrier for some young people was not having people to talk to about getting into post-secondary opportunities. This led to youth suggesting that savings be used to build “college preparation centers.” Along with this they included offering more “scholarships” to offset tuition costs and other financial burdens that often dissuade youth from pursuing their goals and interests. Lastly, youth in the session pointed out that none of these investments would make sense if barriers to educational opportunities existed for youth who ended up in prison so they suggested that there be “policy changes for youth who go to prison to [be able] to go to school and continue their education.”



Recommendation #5

Invest in meeting the basic needs of youth, transportation, and getting rid of food deserts.

After discussing the broader investments that should be made for young people in communities, participants in the room began to talk about the importance of meeting the basic needs of youth which included using savings from closures to offer “free meals for youth” in schools and “[getting] everyone a car”, so that every young people and their families could have a means of transportation.

Youth also talked about the need to make intentional investments in every community to get rid of “food deserts”, one suggestion youth had was knocking down liquor stores and remodeling “those spaces for youth and families” and build “community markets” so that youth and families have access to affordable and healthy food. Along with community markets, youth also suggested investments in “community farms/gardens [so that youth can make] their own food and [get] involved with agriculture.



FRESH DUTCH RED CHILLIES
12.50
K.G CLASS I

ENGLISH LITTLE GEM
1.20
PACKET CLASS I

FRESH BRAZILIAN GINGER
5.99
K.G CLASS I

FRESH BELGIAN CHICORY
3.20
K.G CLASS I

BEST BELGIAN BEEF TOMATOES
2.20
K.G CLASS I

FRESH DUTCH BUNCH RADISH
1.40
BUNCH CLASS I

SPRING ONIONS
5.00
K.G CLASS I



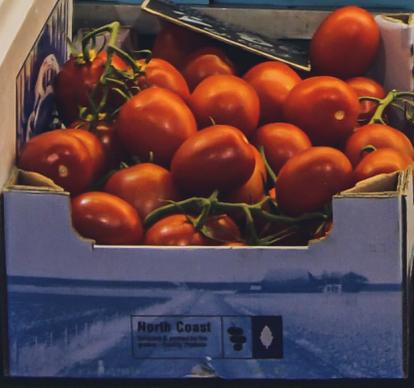
BRITISH
REGISTRATION NO. 081012
CLASS I
K.G CLASS I

BRITISH
REGISTRATION NO. 081012
CLASS I
K.G CLASS I



FRESH KENYAN MANGE TOUT
12.00
K.G CLASS I

FRESH KENYAN FINE BEANS
11.50
K.G CLASS I



FRENCH GARLIC
8.00
K.G CLASS I



FRESH ENGLISH NET GARLIC
9.95
K.G CLASS I

FRESH ENGLISH HERITAGE RADISH
2.95
BUNCH CLASS I



ENGLISH HERITAGE TOMATOES
6.95
K.G CLASS I



FRESH DUTCH RADISH PACKET
8.00
K.G CLASS I

insecticide free

insecticide free



Recommendation #6

Invest in community-based alternatives to incarceration.

Young people recommended that resources be invested in community-based programs, especially connections with mentors who have lived experience and can relate to them in the community. Additionally the young people emphasized the importance of providing families with what they need to be parents and to be healthy. For the young people, opportunities to make positive changes in their communities and access to meaningful jobs were vital components of any alternatives to incarceration.

Lastly, youth emphasized the need for investments into diversion options rooted in “restorative justice” practices such as “peace circles.” Youth in the room also felt that adults working with young people in any type of program or service needed to be ready to handle the diverse needs of youth. As one participant stated, “anyone working with youth should receive special training to [be able to] work with youth.”

I AM POWERFUL

How would incarcerated youth transform the juvenile justice system?

Reforming Detention is an ongoing project in 17 states with 100+ youth-led centers that connect incarcerated youth, advocates, and policy advocates to transform Virginia's juvenile justice system.

Each summer, the project hosts an art and advocacy program in Richmond. These days a week, youth from the Richmond County Detention Center's **Next Generation Program** leave their facility and come to the "ART" center, 87-85. They work with artists from across the region to produce a series of media campaigns and public exhibitions that visualize their ideas for transforming the juvenile justice system and ending the school-to-prison pipeline.

The exhibition includes work created this summer, with some additional content from last summer's pilot. With your help, we will use their art and advocacy materials across the state to schools, legislators, public departments, public spaces, and beyond to spark dialogue and advance conversations around the issues, impacts, and alternatives in the juvenile justice system.

The project is supported by the **Johns Hopkins University Center for Communications Programs**, **RTM Partners** & **Artists.org**.

This work is part of the ongoing **Reforming Detention** project and will be used to advance the mission of the organization.

For more information, please contact info@reformingdetention.org.



A Walk Through the System: What changes need to be made to the current system?

As part of the visioning session, young leaders in the room were provided with an opportunity to talk about their experiences with the system and share what could have been different for them. Although the room did include young people who had been incarcerated before, the room also included a young person whose mother was a correctional officer, another whose father was currently incarcerated, and one who worked as a parole officer.



The goal of the conversation was to have young people in the room discuss the different points of the system and what could be changed, however, most of their recommendations were either connected to schools, their communities, and for the young people and families needing specialized support. As one young person stated: “We should be doing everything possible to not have a young person set foot in the system to begin with.”

The following are some of the recommendations that stemmed from that conversation.



Recommendation #7

Hold government responsible to fund communities that have been impacted by gun violence.

Several of the young people in the room discussed the need to invest in communities most impacted by gun violence noting the fact that many of the young people currently in the justice system are also from these very communities. Participants explicitly recommended that government and system leaders be held accountable for ensuring that communities affected by gun violence have all the resources necessary to ensure that youth and families are able to exist in their neighborhoods without the fear of being shot. Youth also suggested that investments be made for “shooter response teams” to be able to hire “people who will stand in corners where shootings [have] happened to give out info and promote peace.”

**PROTECT
KIDS
NOT GUNS**



Recommendation #8

Adults need to listen and talk to young people, show youth love and support, and move away from punitive responses.

Youth in the room reflected on their own experiences with the system, their families, and through recalling the experiences of their peers and shared that “things could have been avoided with a conversation.” Young people shared how some of their peers inevitably ended up in the system because nobody took the time to talk to them and ask them if something was wrong and/or if there was any support that they needed. They also talked about the lack of love and support that youth in communities experience and how “giving young people a simple hug” could make a significant difference in the life of a young person.

As youth described, a huge part of the problem in being able to help youth in communities comes from the fact that “youth and adults don’t communicate with each other.” Because of this reality young people suggested that adults, “instead of doing all this punitive stuff after things have happened (e.g. youth bringing a gun to school),” that they engage in a conversation with youth asking them very intentional questions (“ex: why do you need to carry a gun?”).

As youth explained, the goal of holding room for conversations instead of reacting in a punitive way is so that adults “understand why [young] people are doing the things that they are doing” rather than make assumptions and be reactive. Lastly, youth also recommended that there be “storytelling for adults,” as one young person put it: “youth are always being asked to share what they are going through. Adults should also share how they go to where they are now.”



Recommendation #9

Break the school-to-prison pipeline, reform suspension policies, and invest in youth and teachers.

While talking with youth about what could be different with the justice system, they began to make connections to how conditions in their school settings resembled that of the juvenile justice systems in their states. Because of these reflections youth explicitly asked that government leaders “invest in youth, teachers, and communities” and that schools refrain from “keeping files of young people when they get in trouble” as that immediately puts a focus on the negative as opposed to the positives that a young person brings to their school environment.

Furthermore, youth in the room highly recommended that schools throughout the country focus on “reforming suspension” because as one youth bluntly put it, “[suspension] does nothing for youth. They just sit at home.” They also emphasized the need for schools to “really connect with parents who have the ability to offer support at home without system intervention.” This was particularly highlighted because youth felt that oftentimes problems at home are dealt with by schools with a one size fits all approach. Lastly, youth emphasized the need for teachers to have “extra training to have a better eye to issues that young people are going through” and also increasing “teacher diversity” as well as hiring teachers who are truly invested in young people and who don’t “just see their role as a job.”



Acknowledgements

Hernan Carvente Martinez of the Youth First Initiative facilitated the visioning session and drafted this document. Reid Stowe (Richmond, VA) and JWa'n Moore (Hampton, VA) also supported this process as young leader co-facilitators in the room. As much as possible, Hernan tried to capture and summarize the comments and words of the young people in the listening session without editorializing or altering the content.

These four organizations collaborated on organizing, facilitating and documenting the visioning session:



Cities United is a national network of mayors focused on making sure all our children grow up in communities that are safe, healthy and hopeful. Cities United mayors are committed to reducing the homicide and shooting rates of young Black men and boys ages 14-24 by 50% by the year 2025. Moreover, Cities United is committed to restoring hope to these communities and building pathways to justice, employment, education and increased opportunities for residents.

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<https://citiesunited.org>



The Youth First Initiative is a national campaign to end youth incarceration and invest in community based supports, services and opportunities for youth. Youth First seeks to achieve a tipping point in ending youth incarceration and shifting resources towards investments in youth in their communities. The initiative is fiscally sponsored by the New Venture Fund, a 501 c 3 charity.

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<https://nokidsinprison.org>

PERFORMING STATISTICS



Performing Statistics is a cultural organizing project that uses art to model, imagine, and advocate for alternatives to youth incarceration.

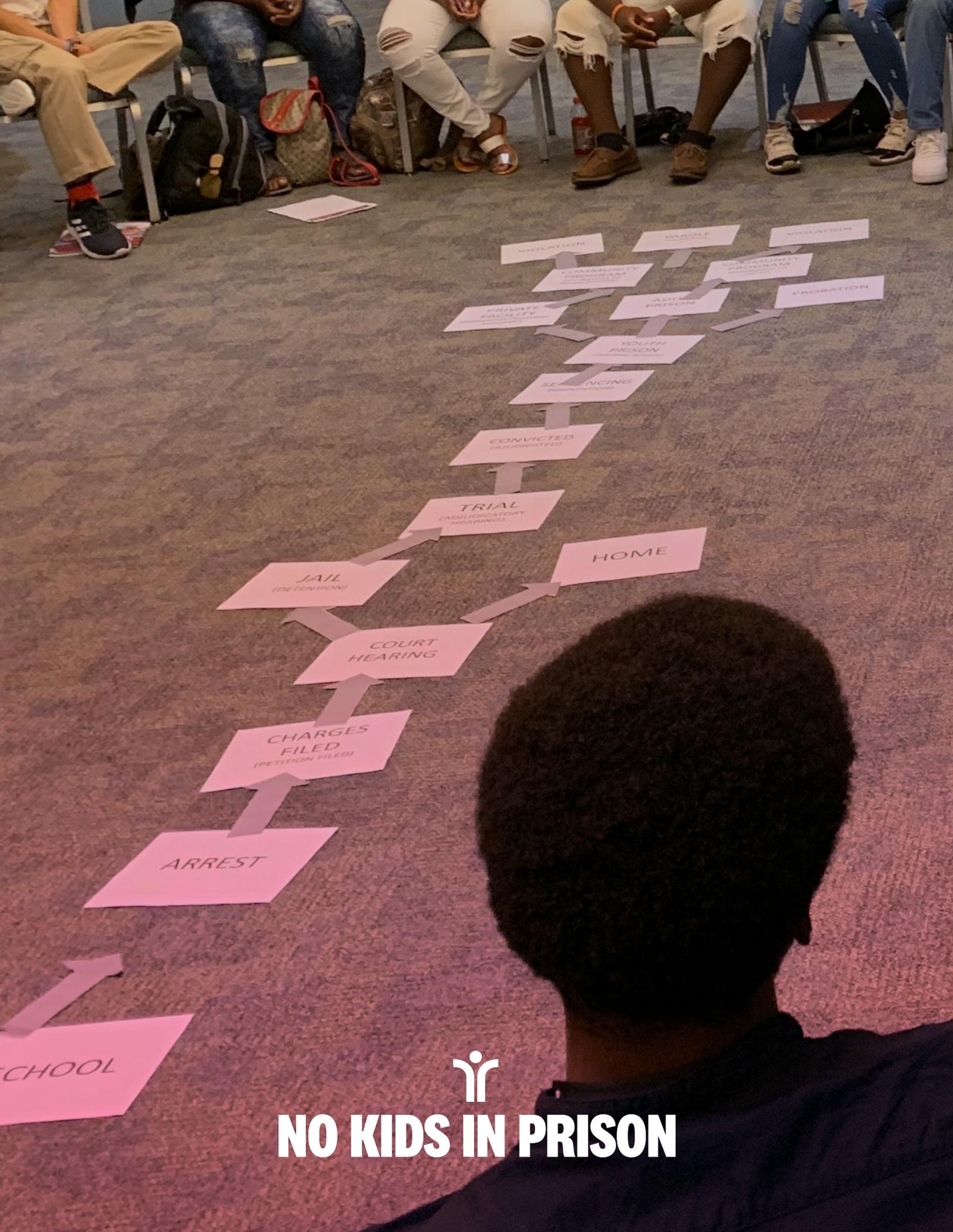
<https://performingstatistics.org>



RISE for Youth is a nonpartisan campaign committed to dismantling the youth prison model by promoting the creation of community-based alternatives to youth incarceration. Our work centers the voices of impacted youth and communities and challenges racial injustice in Virginia.

<https://riseforyouth.org>

All four organizations would like to thank the young people who participated in the sessions for their experiences and insights.



SCHOOL

ARREST

CHARGES FILED
(PETITION FILED)

COURT HEARING

JAIL
(DETENTION)

TRIAL
(ADJUDICATORY HEARING)

CONVICTED
(ADJUDICATED)

SENTENCING
(DISPOSITION)

YOUTH PRISON
(DETENTION FACILITY)

ADULT PRISON

PROBATION

RESTORATION PROGRAM
(RESTORATION)

MAYBE

VIOLATION

HOME



NO KIDS IN PRISON