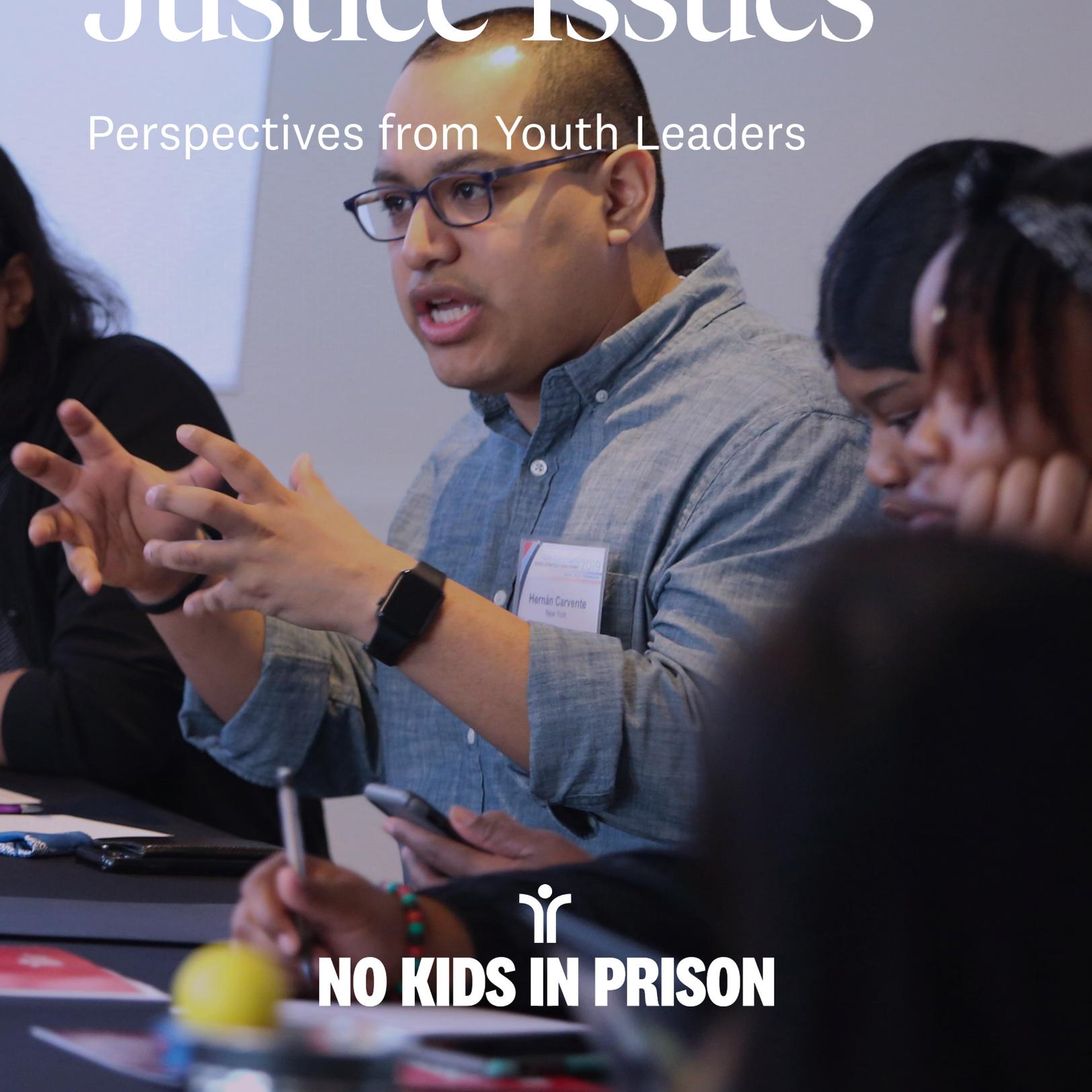


Covering Youth Justice Issues

Perspectives from Youth Leaders



NO KIDS IN PRISON

Journalists writing about youth justice and incarceration often struggle with how to paint an accurate picture of the justice system, and the young people who have experienced it. On October 5, 2018, Hernan Carvente Martinez, National Youth Partnership Strategist for the Youth First Initiative and Jim St. Germain, author of *A Stone of Hope: A Memoir*, spoke to journalists at John Jay College in New York. Drawing on their own lived expertise with the youth justice system, both men offered advice on how to responsibly and effectively cover youth justice issues. The key lessons they shared are summarized below, and their full remarks are available at <https://bit.ly/2Mhqq0T>

— **Treat young people with dignity through respectful language choices and interactions**

- When interviewing young people, recognize that they may not have prior experience with the media. Provide helpful background information and context for your work, as well as respecting confidentiality and other legal protections.
- Write about young people who have experienced incarceration as young people, not “juveniles” or “offenders” or “inmates.”

“We’re all human beings and so having an actual dialogue before even jumping to the questions might actually be really important. I’ve had reporters where I’ve had conversations and they want to get straight to the point and it’s like, ‘I don’t even know your full name.’” —HCM

“I’m not a juvenile inmate, I’m a young person. I was always a young person, even when I went into the justice system.” —HCM

“The media has a responsibility...to represent young people with dignity, humanity at all times, as if they were your own kids, your nephew, your brothers and sisters.” —JSG

1.) Some quotes have been lightly edited for clarity and brevity.



Photo: Amanda Maglione

— Recognize your own role in shaping the public narrative

- As a journalist your words—and the parts of a story you include and leave out—can shape audience perceptions of young people who have experienced incarceration. Ensure that your stories include not just young people’s past mistakes and experiences, but also their current successes and future hopes and dreams.
- Advocate for the young people who share their experiences and expertise with you throughout the editorial process. Ensure that final publications are completely accurate and paint a full picture of everything the youth shared, not just out-of-context facts or quotes, even if this involves “pushing back” on editors or others in your organization.
- » **Recommended Resource:** Moving from them to us: Challenges in reframing violence among youth (Berkeley Media Studies Group): <https://bit.ly/2z0JCXT>

“You [as journalists] have the power in your pens—or in your laptops—to change the narratives.” —HCM

“Most of the stories that have been written about me have highlighted a lot of the things that I went through that led up to where I am now and then they stopped there. They never talked about what I do now or what successes I’ve had.” —HCM

“A white guy walks into the school and shoots 50 innocent babies, the headline [uses words like] ‘mentally ill, PhD, lone wolf’ and the words that they use to describe this person, to make that person human, [makes you] feel bad for this guy who just slaughtered 50 kids. Let that be a black or brown kid from Brownsville, Chicago [and] there’s a different picture of that person. Not of them in the graduation cap and gown, or going to church, and words like ‘thug’ and ‘criminal’ are used...and a mug shot...to paint this image.” —JSG

“Our kids are no different than the prep kids you see going into private school...the only difference is that they came into the world with burdens that they did not choose...the color of their skin, their parents socioeconomic status, the neighborhood they were born into, and so they just have to find a way as kids...to live within that, and that’s not an easy thing to do. So for me it’s about showing them an alternative, to love them in a way that will then force them to love themselves.” —JSG



Photo: Amanda Maglione

— Learn more about the realities of the youth justice system and about alternatives to incarceration

- Recognize that incarceration is not a safe place for young people, and that punitive rules and “scared straight” tactics don’t work as well as therapeutic approaches and positive relationships.

“[When I came into the justice system I was] treated in ways that were not humane and also not conducive to my rehabilitation in any way....[I was] in a place where violence was an everyday thing, where I had to watch my back...I had to constantly be on a hyper vigilant state because I needed to make sure that I was taking care of not just my own well-being but also just the environment around me, making sure that no one else was getting prepared to get hurt...” —HCM

“I think for me incarceration is that darkness that envelops young people when they’ve lost all hope and when systems and people around them have lost all hope on them as well. For me, breaking the cycle of incarceration for young people means bringing light to young people who have essentially been deemed and cast off to the side because of the worst things that they’ve ever done, and really giving them the opportunity to show their true light to the world and to the people around them.” —HCM

“The kid that I was, and some of the kids I know, have seen more by the age of 15 then the people who were taking them [to scared straight programs] to trying to scare them. Some of those kids have seen so many things in life, things that they should not see, that they can actually scare the people who are trying to ‘scare them [straight.]” —JSG

“I remember the first time...when people started behaving towards me as if I mattered and all of a sudden I started to look at myself as if I mattered” —JSG

“[I learned] that if I wanted to succeed, that I needed to invest in myself and that investment in myself would lead to me helping other people in the long term...That’s a lesson that I learned in prison but it wasn’t a lesson that I learned because of the prison environment. It was a lesson that I learned because one man took a shot on me and said that he would look beyond all of the negative stereotypes and things that I was putting out there and see the positive in me or that light that I couldn’t see because to me everything was darkness at that time.” —HCM

— Cover what happens before youth ever come into contact with the justice system

- Black and brown communities receive fewer resources and more policing, and black children are **twice as likely** to be suspended from school. This contributes to the huge disparities in incarceration rates for children of color, and addressing this in media coverage can help ensure that the public truly understands youth justice issues.

“I have a five-year-old son, and just think about my son being suspended from school for throwing a pencil at someone. We know that if a white child does the exact same thing they don’t get suspended. And there are reasons for that: we’ve been preconditioned to view young black and brown men [and] women in certain light. So for me incarceration starts way before we even get in touch with any of these systems. We feel like we live in open air prisons at all times. So I think that it’s important as writers and journalists to talk about incarceration even before kids touch the juvenile justice system.” —JSG

“I’ve never met a child who wanted to do bad. I’ve met people who’ve adapted to their surroundings, who know that this is what they have to do to survive. —JSG

“When you are young, black or brown, poor, incarceration for you starts way before you even get in touch with the system. You’re over policed; the resources that are distributed are not being given to your community; you don’t get the same education as the rich white kids from the Upper West Side, and you don’t get the same benefit of doubt [when you are a] young black or brown boy.” —JSG

— Recognize young people who have experienced incarceration as experts

- Often a reporter’s first call on a youth justice story is to an agency or law enforcement official. Yet young people who’ve been involved in the system, including those who’ve also worked to advocate for change, have expertise that is needed to understand what’s wrong with current approaches, and to find solutions.
- Young people are able to be completely honest, as they may not have to worry about the same political or financial concerns as system stakeholders when identifying a bad practice, or a potentially better approach.

“As journalists I would challenge you...to constantly think about young people not just as experts on experienced harm and pain, but also experts on solutions.” —HCM

“We should always think about all of this as being solution-based and solution driven. If we really want to promote an agenda that is focused on humanizing and upholding the dignity of young people, those should be the questions that we’re asking from the beginning, and that’s where I think you [as a journalist] can learn how to walk the fine line between tokenization and/or exploitation and actually supporting a young person.” —HCM

“Whenever we talk to [young people] about any issue and we start talking about not just the problem or their stories but essentially what solutions could have...helped them, the solutions that they come up with sometimes are not what policymakers and researchers and other people with the letters behind their name come up with.” —HCM

“Young people, because they’re young, are not limited to...preconceived notions or research...and have that creative energy and enthusiasm to think about solutions that we as we get older we forget about because we’re stuck in our old ways.” —HCM

“Those closest to the issues should be closest to the power...over the years we’ve tried a lot of measures within the juvenile justice system [but] we just keep failing over and over because we’re not actually speaking to the experts themselves and when we do speak to them we actually don’t listen to them. Sometimes we put them on panels, and they’re speaking, and then we’ll keep on doing what we’re doing.” —JSG



Photo: Amanda Maglione

— Solution focused story ideas from youth leaders

Recognizing that journalists are always interested in emerging trends and issues for future stories, the speakers identified several practices and solutions that could be advanced in any community:

Credible messengers: Several states are using credible messengers to support young people in their communities. Hernan Carvente Martinez describes credible messaging as an “opportunity for young people who come into contact with the system to receive mentorship and support from individuals who’ve been in their circumstances but have now transformed themselves and want to give back to other young people in return.”

» **Recommended Resource:** Credible Messenger Justice Center, <https://cmjcenter.org>

“Credible messengers are the people who essentially have come out of the trenches and said ‘we want to help our communities, we want to make sure other young people don’t go through the experiences we went through, and we want to provide a solution to the problems that everybody keeps perpetuating out there.’” —HCM

Transformative/restorative justice: This approach can help make the narrative shift from talking about violent and nonviolent offenses to looking for ways to address harm, rather than just punish people. Hernan Carvente Martinez explained that learning about transformative/restorative justice can help reporters “begin to understand the complexities of talking about violence not just from a place of the individual who caused it but also from the survivor’s lens.”

» **Recommended Resource:** Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice, www.curyj.org and Common Justice www.commonjustice.org

“Survivors [of violence] often try to humanize even the person who committed the harm to them because ...they realize punishing them and putting them in prison for the rest of their lives doesn’t fix the problem, and if anything it exacerbates it.” —HCM

Investing in community-based alternatives to incarceration: Across the country, communities are closing youth prisons and investing in less expensive and more effective alternatives. Reporters should find and highlight local grassroots organizations that are active in their communities. Bringing focus and attention to these groups can help raise public awareness of the issues and give community members opportunities to support groups who are working hard to bring about change. (Reporters should also bring attention to who is benefiting financially when young people are locked up, at great cost to the public.)

» **Recommended Resource:** Youth First, <https://nokidsinprison.org>

“Moving from the youth prison model to this community-based continuum of supportive services is where we really need to move in the field, and I think as reporters you can really do a lot of justice in helping us promote those programs more effectively.” —HCM

“When it comes to investing in the lives of children, particularly black and brown children...we [need to be] shifting the resources from the system to the community. If you are closing juvenile justice facilities then ...[is] that money going back to the school system which a lot of these young people are coming from?” —JSG

“It’s a system that we can’t fix by just putting band-aids over, like bullet wounds. It’s gonna take time, but we have to invest in young people from the beginning. We know that if a young person goes to pre-k the likelihood of not going into the juvenile justice system is that much higher. We know that if a young person has graduated from high school their likelihood of going into the system is much lower.” —JSG

“When [reporters] write about young people and their misfortunes in the juvenile justice system, it’s important to talk about the money, because ultimately, sadly, the truth is that this is a business for a lot of people....and a lot of people make money off of the pain and suffering of black and brown kids...I think it’s always important to talk about the money and follow the money when it comes to fixing this juvenile justice system.” —JSG

“Here in New York State, we spend approximately a quarter million dollars to keep a young person in the juvenile justice system...What happens if you reinvest and shift that money into the community? Into education and employment opportunities and mentorship and in building community centers in the neighborhood? We know that a lot of youngsters get in trouble with the law because they don’t have the infrastructure. They can’t go to karate classes, piano lessons, yoga, therapy--all of the things that when you have resources you’re capable of going to. So what ends up happening is that they spend a lot of time in the wrong places, which then pushes them into the system.” —JSG



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