

I'm speaking to you from the state of Washington where I've been incarcerated since the age of 15. Going through the system I've learned that this system was created for us but the thought of us being involved in the creation itself had not occurred. In other words, the system wasn't built by us and therefore it makes sense that the system doesn't work for us. I say us, directed at people of color and people from poor communities who are disproportionately impacted by the system.

Many people who I've worked with and as well as myself have tried to stress the importance of bringing individuals who were and are currently incarcerated to the table when making decisions that may impact them or decisions that would make sense to have their input. Without authenticity, real change doesn't exist. So including those with lived experience alongside community outreach programs and organizations, is the most effective way to ensure our youth are properly provided the tools and are equipped with the skills to succeed wherever they are. For example, here in Washington State for Asian and Pacific Islander youth like myself, we have an organization from my community called Tuff Love that come into the facility to meet with the youth. In our group meetings that we have we learn about our culture and where we come from. We learn the values and morals and ways of our culture that we've been so out of touch with. We learn from someone who comes from a similar background as us and when you find more about who you are, you get a sense that you belong, and how many times do youth try to belong but find themselves looking in the wrong places?

Since the beginning of COVID, those inside of the system have experienced isolation even more. Knowing the impact isolation has on brain development, you can assume right that incarcerated youth are experiencing a heightened amount of stress and anxiety because of the many outlets and ways of coping were closed off, due to the pandemic. When we speak about rehabilitation, we need to ask ourselves how exactly do we expect our youth to find rehabilitation in a prison setting. We're essentially hoping, the at times hopeless and for the most part helpless youth to find hope and help within the environment they are thrown into. It's almost as if we're hoping a flower to bloom in a dark room. We have to become the light for our youth to grow and not the dark room that prevents growth.

How our country can do this is through understanding things like generational trauma, understanding what rehabilitates as much as what de-habilitates, understanding that its duty to the individual doesn't end upon release, this as well as introducing love and care into the lives of youth who have been deprived of those essentials growing up, and what i feel is very important is actually talking to the youth who are incarcerated.

We see that our system does a good job at holding those inside accountable for their actions but what about the rehabilitation and re-entry parts which are just as important for not only our communities but the youth themselves.

Many students change out of school clothes to prison jumpsuits. On any given day, around 48,000 youth sit inside of our system. Most of these youth come from public schools. In our school districts many youth are arrested on or near campus for status offenses. That is where we put youth in contact with the system where youth are more likely to then to end up more frequently or later on in their lives'. Due to "Zero tolerance" policies, youth have been suspended and expelled at dramatic rates over the past decade. When suspended or expelled, youth are not given the opportunity to receive education for that time being. During this idle time is where youth are likely to commit an offense. This is where students are funneled through the school to prison pipeline. Youth who struggle in school need a

helping hand, not hand-cuffs. Sending youth from our schools to our justice system should never be an option. Instead, we need to provide our youth with proper care and support in hopes for them to succeed.

Our youth who enter the system may often leave the system as legal adults. Not knowing how to function as an adult in society is a big factor in why they experience recidivism. If we hope to stop our youth who become young adults from re-offending upon release, we need to offer them real help. For youth with no money, we need to give them help financially. This means financial literacy programs and jobs where they can actually earn money. For youth with no housing, we need to offer them housing or they are literally just being thrown out onto the streets. As someone who entered the system at a young age, I think of how different it will be when I'm out. The last time I was home, I had been a teenager and now I'll be an adult with adult responsibilities. I know that if I'm not prepared to take on those responsibilities I am more likely to return to jail. This is why I know from living experience that programs or trainings that help me even when I am released is essential in any youth's time while incarcerated.

Youth who are sentenced as adults get one message from the system that is very clear that they don't care about you. Our youth should be kept in the juvenile justice system and not sent to the adult system which puts them through more trauma than they have already been through. Being a part of passing legislation in my state, I have seen the positive impacts extending the age a youth is able to spend in the juvenile system to their 25th birthday has had. Instead of being shipped off to the Department of Corrections the youth are able to make the best with the opportunities that the juvenile institutions offer. Also, instead of going to prison for a short amount of time where recidivism rates are tripled once an individual walks through the door, youth are able to possibly enter a community placement program where they can get a job and attend school. By keeping youth out of the adult system, we offer them better outcomes in their future.

When it comes to changing how this system operates and what it looks like by passing bills into law, instead of talking about why it shouldn't work, we should ask how it will work.

Thank you.