

April 2026



Helping Youth Thrive:

A NEW YORK PERSPECTIVE

NICJR★
National Institute for
Criminal Justice Reform

The
Pinkerton
Foundation



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INTRODUCTION

On April 30, 2026, the National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (NICJR), Pinkerton Foundation, and Women Building Up held a Forum entitled High Risk and Hard to Reach: Solutions for Young People Often Over-prosecuted, Underserved, or Ignored.

The Forum followed up on NICJR's publication, [High Risk, Hard to Reach Youth](#), which found that, as the number of young people locked up in the country's youth and adult prisons has declined dramatically over the past quarter century, the challenges faced by the youth remain complex and go unmet in many traditional youth-serving programs.

The purpose of the Forum was to bring together young people, advocates, and nonprofit and government officials to discuss solutions that eschew simplistic and overly punitive carceral solutions for this population and instead invest deeply in helping these young people thrive.

To better inform the discussion and the Forum participants, we reached out to several New York City organizations working with youth that some would consider hard to reach to ask for their views and insights.

Specifically, we asked them to respond to these three questions:

- Are system-involved young people today presenting any different challenges than they did 10, 20, or 30 years ago, in your view? If so, in what way?
- How does your organization see to it that young people with particularly challenging backgrounds and arrest/adjudication charges are able to "make it" outside of carceral placements?
- If you could give one piece of advice to the incoming NYC administration about how to help young people with complex challenges thrive, what would it be? Why that advice?

Their remarkable responses follow. We extend our thanks to Common Justice, Girl Vow, Incredible Credible Messengers, Kings Against Violence Initiative, Lead By Example, Living Redemption, Possibility Project, Team B.R.O.W.N., and We Build the Block for taking the time to share their wisdom with us.

April Glad, Pinkerton Foundation
David Muhammad, National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform
Vincent Schiraldi, Pinkerton Foundation

COMMON JUSTICE



common justice

Are system-involved young people today presenting any different challenges than they did 10, 20, or 30 years ago, in your view? If so, in what way?

The core conditions that challenge young people have not changed—structural inequity, concentrated poverty, divestment from social institutions like education and health, and unhealed cycles of violence and trauma. Still, the world since COVID is harder for young people—the collapse of the job market (especially at the entry level), the disruptions to education, the skyrocketing housing costs, and the residual impacts of isolation and interrupted relationships make it harder and harder for young people who are truly trying to succeed to do so. Alongside those challenges, the wide availability of guns escalates harm and social media often accelerates it.

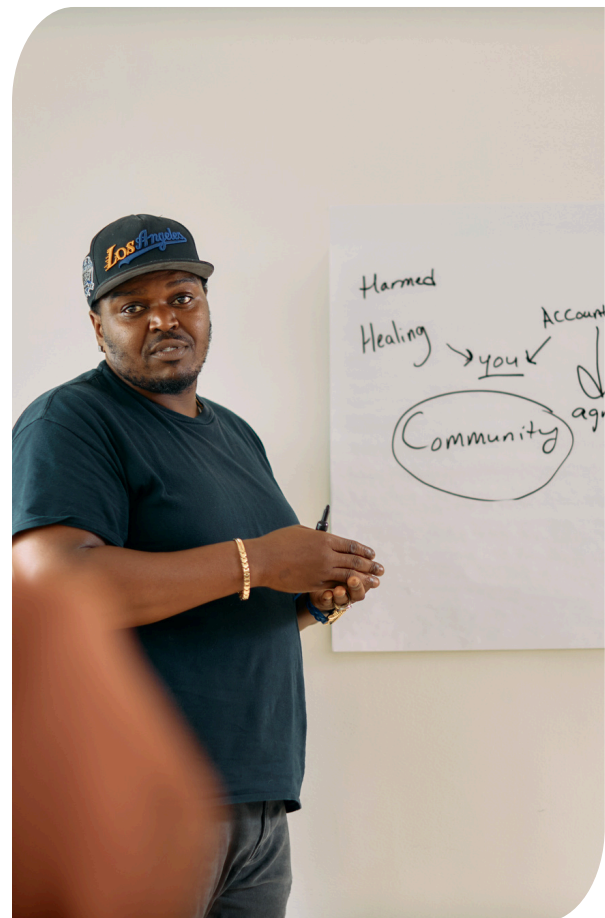
How does your organization see to it that young people with particularly challenging backgrounds and arrest/adjudication charges are able to "make it" outside of carceral placements?

At Common Justice, we believe that people who have caused harm are both responsible for and capable of making repair for the impacts of their actions. We begin by ensuring baseline stability as the basis for near-term and long term change. And then we talk with our responsible participants about violence directly and deliberately—about its causes, about its impacts, about our participants' experiences surviving it, about why and how they use it, and about what they can do instead. We use restorative justice to open a dignified pathway to accountability and repair for those who cause harm. And we do all of this in relationship—with our team, with peers, with supporters, and when appropriate, with those they have harmed.

We hold people to high standards and support them in meeting those standards, and we consistently witness young people rise to the challenge and transform.

If you could give one piece of advice to the incoming administration about how to help young people with complex challenges thrive, what would it be? Why that advice?

The administration should invest seriously and thoroughly in community-based solutions to violence. There are neighbors, leaders, and organizations throughout New York City who are positioned to halt cycles of violence, help survivors heal, and deliver the safety we all deserve. They should be resourced. Everyone and everything will benefit if they are.



Responses provided by Danielle Sered, Common Justice, Executive Director.

GIRL VOW



Are system-involved young people today presenting any different challenges than they did 10, 20, or 30 years ago, in your view? If so, in what way?

At Girl Vow, our participants continue to face many of the same systemic oppressions that existed 10, 20, and even 30 years ago. Those who become system-involved are often denied opportunities for education and career growth because they are judged more for their mistakes than supported in their potential. Pigeonholing youth and limiting their futures is unjust and reflects deeply embedded systemic patterns that have persisted for decades. From an early age, women of color are socialized to believe they are less than. Social media continues to amplify these ideals, dictating how women should behave, dress, and define their worth, often in relation to men. Imagine being labeled “failing” by a system that’s failing you. Young people are not their failures.

We are witnessing troubling patterns emerge, such as young women who are increasingly taking responsibility for the actions of male partners involved in criminal activity, a rise in girls facing severe charges such as homicide, girls who are missing and are not looked for, and the persistent underreporting of intimate partner violence. Our girls are falling through the cracks, overlooked, and underserved. While the world has evolved with technological advancements and increased surveillance of young people’s lives through social media, the core injustices remain unchanged. The systems may look different, but the discrimination within them continues to harm, hold, and limit their lives.

How does your organization see to it that young people with particularly challenging backgrounds and arrest/adjudication charges are able to "make it" outside of carceral placements?

Girl Vow, Inc. ensures that young people with challenging backgrounds or who have been system-involved succeed outside of carceral placements by valuing the independence and experience of the young girls we work with. We teach our girls to rebuke the system when it no longer serves them. We focus on seeing each young woman for who she is, rather than treating her as a means to an end or as a product of her past. We intentionally create opportunities that expose young women to spaces they may have never had access to before, rooms where they can feel motivated, seen, and inspired to envision new possibilities for their lives. At the same time, we actively challenge harmful social norms, particularly the expectations placed on young women to carry emotional, social, or even legal burdens for others. We encourage self-advocacy and independence, equipping young women with the tools to speak up for themselves and navigate systems that have historically failed them. This includes learning to master alternatives to incarceration and helping girls see themselves as leaders in their communities, not as individuals defined by their involvement in the system.



If you could give one piece of advice to the incoming administration about how to help young people with complex challenges thrive, what would it be? Why that advice?

If I could offer one piece of advice to an incoming administration, it would be this: remember that you are there to serve, and young people are there to lead. Engage with us. The responsibility of leadership is not just to create change on paper, but to embody it in the everyday actions, decisions, and the lives of others. Young people must be seen as more than their mistakes. They need space to be heard, valued, and trusted not just as participants, but as decision-makers. When youth are given real opportunities and shape the systems that impact their lives, they are more likely to thrive and create meaningful change within their communities. Systems cannot effectively support young people without valuing their voices.

Responses provided by Dawn Rowe, Founder, Girl Vow.



INCREDIBLE CREDIBLE MESSENGERS



ICM

Incredible Credible Messengers

Are system-involved young people today presenting any different challenges than they did 10, 20, or 30 years ago, in your view? If so, in what way?

Absolutely! While youth incarceration has declined, today's young people face more layered challenges. In communities like Brownsville, we see rising mental health concerns, including depression, anxiety, and suicidality, alongside increased exposure to violence both in-person and online. Technology has contributed to social isolation, reduced physical activity, and normalization of harmful behaviors. We are also seeing greater family instability, fear tied to immigration and sociopolitical tensions, and increased access to weapons such as ghost guns. Despite low unemployment rates, many youth feel disconnected from opportunity and purpose. These overlapping challenges require more holistic, relationship-based responses.

How does your organization see it that young people with particularly challenging backgrounds and arrest/adjudication charges are able to "make it" outside of carceral placements?

ICM uses a peer-led, relationship-based model rooted in lived experience. We are proud to report a 0% re-arrest and recidivism rate among justice-involved participants. Youth at risk of system involvement also show improvements in behavior, family relationships, and reduced system contact. We help young people recognize their value and potential while addressing trauma by leveraging strengths. Through mentorship, restorative practices, and leadership development, participants begin to shift how they see themselves and their futures, evolving into leaders who create positive peer networks, lead initiatives, and engage in advocacy at local and federal levels. When young people see real outcomes from their actions, they commit to growth and community change.



If you could give one piece of advice to the incoming administration about how to help young people with complex challenges thrive, what would it be? Why that advice?

- The root of all disorder is disconnection, and young people thrive in structure, consistency, and meaningful relationships. When youth are labeled “high risk and hard to reach,” it often means they are not being met where they are and are receiving inadequate or misaligned support; however, strategic, coordinated investments help young people become the change, truly thrive, and sustain progress, which is far more humane and cost-effective than incarceration.
- Invest in engaging, culturally relevant wraparound services led by trusted community members. Focus on addressing the root causes that young people themselves identify, and give them ownership in creating positive change within their communities. When youth can see that their actions lead to real impact, they begin to understand their value and their ability to make a difference.
- Programs are only as effective as the relationships behind them. In communities where young people are living in survival mode, trust drives outcomes. When support comes from people who understand their lived experience, young people are more likely to engage, stay consistent, and build resilience. That’s why ICM’s restorative practices approach is building trust and understanding before jumping into action.
- For decades, we have invested heavily in enforcement—including wars on drugs and guns—without making the same level of investment in housing, mental health, workforce development, and economic opportunity. At the same time, there is a growing disconnect between policymakers and the communities they serve. Spending more time with constituents and listening directly to their needs would lead to more effective, community-driven solutions.

Responses provided by Nedinma Essence Jibuiké-Blount, Development Director, Incredible Credible Messengers, Inc.





Are system-involved young people today presenting any different challenges than they did 10, 20, or 30 years ago, in your view? If so, in what way?

Today, young people face different challenges compared to previous generations, particularly in developing socialization skills. For decades, youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were forced to cultivate personalities and behaviors aimed at protecting their physical well-being, as Jonathan Kozol described in his writings. Now, young people from similar backgrounds must adopt behaviors to shield themselves from digital threats such as cyberbullying, poverty shaming, and the pressures of having an "imaginary audience" online. Consequently, they are creating multiple personas—rather than coherent personalities—that they present across various settings, such as home, school, peer groups, and online.

Additionally, we need to consider the implications of cannabis legalization. While young people are not legally permitted to purchase cannabis, laws in places like New York City have made access easier for minors. For instance, an 11-year-old can ask a 21-year-old neighbor or acquaintance to buy cannabis for them. Although the medical effects of cannabis are well-documented, society lacks adequate substance abuse interventions for children as young as 10 and 11. More work is needed to address the fact that early reports indicate younger people are using cannabis for both exploration and long-term use.

How does your organization see to it that young people with particularly challenging backgrounds and arrest/adjudication charges are able to "make it" outside of carceral placements?

At KAVI, we connect with young people on multiple levels—physically, emotionally, and developmentally. For example, an 18-year-old male may stand six feet tall, but he could be functioning at an emotional and developmental level of a 12-year-old, struggling to communicate and understand his feelings. Our approach starts with understanding their basic needs and childhood experiences through engagement and surveys. At the same time, we surround them with caring adults and peers—both current and former program participants—who are trained to form meaningful relationships. These individuals assist others in accessing necessary services and facilitate conversations that build bonds and trust. Consistent engagement with the young person and their family, when possible, fosters a connection that shows our care for them and demonstrates their worth to us.

For young individuals born into traumatic environments, exposed to violence at an early age, facing housing insecurity, experiencing hunger, or suffering mental, physical, or sexual abuse, the consistent offer of food and engagement provides a positive alternative to negative behaviors. Additionally, we advocate for laws that protect the rights of young people, such as Clean Slate, Solutions Not Suspensions, and the Youth Justice and Opportunity Act. These legislative measures create support systems that enable young individuals to thrive without the threat of incarceration, investing in their lives as they navigate the challenges they have inherited.

If you could give one piece of advice to the incoming administration about how to help young people with complex challenges thrive, what would it be? Why that advice?

I would suggest that the new administration focus on unlocking the potential of young people by investing in them through these methods and for these purposes

- **Develop youth/young people housing:** Many young people grow up in homes that do not support their well-being. As a result, they often develop different personas to cope, all while secretly wishing to become someone else. Having a dorm room or apartment where they can safely explore their true selves will provide them with the opportunity to contribute positively to society and avoid negative outcomes, such as imprisonment.
- **Implement an early warning system:** Young people develop criminal tendencies; they are not born with them. When a child is expelled from middle school or arrested at an early age, it should trigger a comprehensive response involving government agencies, community-based organizations, and all available resources. Engaging with the family is essential to ensure they have access to necessary support, including food, housing, clothing, and mental and physical health services for the child. Furthermore, these services should work with parents or caregivers to train them in positive interactions with the child and to create a home environment that promotes the child's success.
- **Improve and create more third spaces:** Schools, community centers, and other public spaces need renovation and redesign to better serve their neighborhoods. Although these facilities are available, many are outdated. For instance, some schools lack auditoriums and gymnasiums, while community centers require upgrades to include modern amenities such as computer labs and podcast or recording studios. Continue diversifying the public school principal and teacher corps: Students who exhibit dangerous or inappropriate behaviors at an early age are more likely to respond positively to well-trained, culturally and neighborhood-based teachers, principals, and school staff than those who do not.
- **Leverage Youth Development Practices and Principles:** To enhance youth development practices in schools, it is essential to incorporate technology and hire staff members beyond just teachers to engage with young people. Traditional teacher training programs often fail to prepare educators to effectively connect with students who have been making adult-like decisions since adolescence. In contrast, youth development practitioners—especially those trained in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)—are well-equipped to support young individuals facing complex challenges. These professionals can help youth develop the necessary skills for a successful transition into adulthood. Additionally, individuals known as Credible Messengers, who have relevant life experiences, can quickly establish trust and meaningful relationships with young people. By bringing in these types of staff, schools can ensure that their communities are supported by caring adults who can address the diverse experiences and emotional needs of the student body.

Responses provided by Ramik Williams, Co-Executive Director, KAVI.

LEAD BY EXAMPLE



LEAD BY EXAMPLE
REVERSE THE TREND

Are system-involved young people today presenting any different challenges than they did 10, 20, or 30 years ago, in your view? If so, in what way?

Yes—today’s young people are facing deeper and more complex challenges than in previous generations. What we are seeing now is not just behavioral issues, but a profound sense of hopelessness. Many young people today do not see a future for themselves, and that lack of vision often shows up as anger, violence, or disengagement.

There is also a noticeable increase in youth experiencing housing instability and homelessness. When a young person is focused on survival—where they are going to sleep, how they are going to eat—it becomes extremely difficult for them to prioritize school, emotional regulation, or long-term decision-making.

Additionally, today’s youth are navigating environments shaped by social media, constant exposure to violence, and a lack of consistent positive role models. Unlike 20 or 30 years ago, many young people are being influenced more by the streets and the internet than by structured community systems. In my experience, the core issue is not that young people are “worse”—it is that they are carrying more, with fewer supports. Their behaviors are often a reflection of unaddressed trauma, instability, and a lack of meaningful connection.

How does your organization see to it that young people with particularly challenging backgrounds and arrest/adjudication charges are able to "make it" outside of carceral placements?

At Lead By Example, our approach is rooted in connection, trust, and accountability. The first step is building a genuine relationship with the young person. Many of the youth we work with have experienced broken trust with systems, adults, and institutions. Before any intervention can be effective, they need to feel seen, heard, and respected. We intentionally pair young people with mentors and leaders they can relate to—individuals who have lived experience and credibility. When a young person respects who is guiding them, they are far more open to change.

From there, we focus on trauma-informed care and social-emotional development. We help young people understand their triggers, manage their emotions, and take control of their reactions. This is combined with practical life skills, including financial literacy, personal responsibility, and decision-making. We also emphasize accountability—not punishment. Young people are taught that their choices matter, but they are also shown that they have the power to choose differently. Our goal is not just to keep youth out of the system, but to equip them with the internal tools and external support needed to thrive in their own communities.

If you could give one piece of advice to the incoming administration about how to help young people with complex challenges thrive, what would it be? Why that advice?

If I could offer one piece of advice, it would be this: invest in building young people from the inside out. Too often, solutions focus only on external control—more policing, more detention, more restrictions. But lasting change comes from internal development. Young people need to understand who they are, where they come from, and what they are capable of becoming. We must teach them their history—so they know they come from strength, resilience, and greatness. That knowledge builds self-worth and shifts identity. At the same time, we must invest in teaching morality, discipline, and emotional control. Many young people are growing up without consistent guidance in these areas, and it directly impacts their decision-making.

I also strongly believe that parenting support should be a priority. Families need tools, education, and resources to create stable environments at home. Everything starts there. When we focus on identity, self-control, and family structure, we address the root—not just the symptoms. That is how we create long-term impact.

Responses provided by Antonio Hendrickson, Founder and CEO, Lead By Example.



LIVING REDEMPTION



Are system-involved young people today presenting any different challenges than they did 10, 20, or 30 years ago, in your view? If so, in what way?

While the core needs of young people, belonging, safety, identity, and opportunity, have remained consistent, what has changed is the depth and intensity of the challenges many young people are carrying today. We are seeing young people navigating layered trauma, including significant mental health challenges, often shaped by ongoing exposure to violence, family instability, economic hardship, and longstanding community disinvestment. These realities are interconnected and persistent. What stands out is not simply that young people are “hard to reach,” but that many have experienced repeated disruption in relationships, support systems, and institutions. As a result, trust is often low, and engagement requires a different level of consistency and authenticity.

We are also seeing young people navigating multiple systems at once, including schools, courts, families, and community dynamics, without the kind of coordinated support necessary for long term stability. In many cases, the challenge is not a lack of services, but a lack of continuity, alignment, and trusted relationships across those systems.

How does your organization see to it that young people with particularly challenging backgrounds and arrest/adjudication charges are able to "make it" outside of carceral placements?

At Living Redemption, our mission is simple and clear: saving lives, healing communities, one relationship at a time. Our approach is shaped by lived experience, both my own and that of the credible messengers who serve alongside me, which allows us to engage young people with authenticity, accountability, and a deep understanding of the challenges they face. We operate through a coordinated, relationship centered ecosystem of care and opportunity that aligns prevention, intervention, healing, and pathways to economic and personal advancement. At the core of this work is Credible Messenger Mentoring, which serves as the foundation for engagement. Individuals with lived experience build authentic, accountable relationships with young people, helping to establish trust where it has often been broken. From that foundation, we provide coordinated support across key areas, including mental health and healing centered care, family strengthening, education and school engagement, community safety, and workforce and economic opportunity.

What distinguishes our approach is continuity. Young people are not moved through disconnected programs, but are supported through consistent relationships and coordinated interventions over time, particularly during critical transitions such as reentry, school disruption, and community conflict. Our work is also informed by ongoing research, data, and evaluation partnerships, allowing us to strengthen our approach while contributing to broader field learning. Ultimately, our role is not simply to help young people avoid incarceration, but to walk alongside them as they build a different trajectory, one rooted in stability, purpose, and belonging.

If you could give one piece of advice to the incoming administration about how to help young people with complex challenges thrive, what would it be? Why that advice?

If I could offer one piece of advice, it would be this: Invest in relationship centered, community rooted infrastructure that is designed for continuity, not fragmentation. Young people with the most complex challenges require more than access to services. They need consistent, trusted relationships, coordinated systems of care, and real pathways to opportunity that are sustained over time.

This means investing in models that integrate mental health support, family strengthening, community based safety, and economic mobility, all anchored by credible messengers who can build trust and maintain engagement. It also requires aligning funding across agencies so that organizations are not forced to operate in silos, but are resourced to provide coordinated, long term support.

If we continue to fund isolated programs, we will continue to see fragmented outcomes. But if we invest in relationship driven, community anchored systems that prioritize stability, accountability, and opportunity, we will see young people not only avoid system involvement, but truly thrive. The solution is not more beds, it is a deeper investment in the people, relationships, and community based infrastructure that make transformation possible.

Responses provided by Rev. Maurice D. Winley, Founder, President, and CEO, Living Redemption.



THE POSSIBILITY PROJECT



**THE
POSSIBILITY
PROJECT**

Are system-involved young people today presenting any different challenges than they did 10, 20, or 30 years ago, in your view? If so, in what way?

The fundamental challenges that system-involved youth face have not essentially changed, but the cultural context of their lives has. We have observed less connection to their communities and fewer meaningful relationships in their lives. People are busy, especially those who struggle financially, and young people are being left to their own devices (technological pun intended). There are less opportunities available to them in format they can access, and there are too few adult leaders who know and understand them and have credible experience that allows them to relate to them. They are, in a word, more alone than young people were a generation ago.

Another factor is the pace of change today. From one year to the next, there are a lot of social and technological changes happening. Keeping up can be difficult and stressful. For youth who are engaged with systems, the time they have to process this acceleration of events and changes is limited and they can get left behind, unable to access opportunities or the means for accessing them.

We have also observed a negativity in general among the systems are young people are engaged in. We believe it is the “mood” of the culture today as many people are pessimistic about the future. Young people are thus ignored or tracked into lower expectations for their futures, they are given too few “you can do it” messages and little optimistic support; they are often discarded as one too many problem to be solved.

Related to this malaise is the mental health focus currently being used to define youth behavior. Many of our youth are being told that “who they are” is the problem, that their learned perspective is flawed, and that they suffer from internal forces beyond their control. While this may be true for some, it is not true for most. This shift toward a mental health lens over the last ten years in particular has had a deleterious effect on young people who can begin to believe there is something wrong with them; and that is why they are unable to achieve, rise, overcome, or thrive.

Another huge issue for all of our young people is the pervasive “surveillance culture” we now live in. Everything anyone says or does can be recorded and then broadcast far and wide. For our young people, this has made them reticent to do anything, or join anything, that might expose them to being seen and heard in damaging ways. It also has them cautious at every turn, meaning any aspiration they might have is outweighed by the risks of trying and being exposed as they try things. They are emotionally guarded to protect themselves and it shows in their hesitation to participate in anything or engage with anyone.

How does your organization see to it that young people with particularly challenging backgrounds and arrest/adjudication charges are able to "make it" outside of carceral placements?

We don't see our system-involved youth as particularly challenging. We meet them where they're at and work to empower them to do the work they need to do to build the futures they want. It sounds simple, but it's really important that we don't pathologize our young people as a challenge, problem, issue or obstacle. They are our partners or colleagues in our work together; their perspective drives our mission. And then we collaborate from there.

The other thing we do is make sure our program is relevant to them by centering them in it. They drive the focus of our activities, they have a voice in the shows we create together and community action projects we organize. The program IS them, as opposed to being just for them. And, we learn together around topics, such as conflict resolution, leadership, or gender roles, that are meaningful and useful to our young people.

We also have credible messengers working on all of our programs. These young adults are more easily able to relate to our system-involved youth, they are better able to impart effective advice, and they gain trust and build credibility that makes a difference. This feature of our leadership cannot be overstated; it is critically important.

We also give our young people experiences that push their comfort zones and prepare them for the world beyond their current scope. They perform on stage, they interact with a diversity of people, they participate in events in different parts of the city doing simple things that many of us take for granted, such as attending a conference or a Broadway show or dining in a restaurant. These experiences open up the world to them, the world that needs their voices and their value.

Most importantly, we listen to our young people first, allowing them to discover their voices and learn to use them. We then build trust with them before we do anything else. As the community forms in each program, the relationships our young people gain are where the impact takes place as they try together to achieve the transformative act of leading and striving for excellence.

If you could give one piece of advice to the incoming administration about how to help young people with complex challenges thrive, what would it be? Why that advice?

Listen to them. Go into the community, into the spaces young people inhabit, and spend time with them, and really listen to them. Listen closely and look for insights being offered. And validate what you hear instead of filtering it through any need you might have. We find that our young people know a lot about what they need and what would empower them. That is, take the risk of centering young people in the municipal dialogue around the issues they present. Include them in the thought leadership on the issues affecting them. Look at young people as contributors to the solution rather than problems for which a solution must be found. They will offer incredibly valuable insights and ideas. They do with us every day.

And then, fund programs they want that can ameliorate the myopia of system involvement. That give young people a chance to see alternative paths for themselves. That ask them to challenge themselves to work to their highest level. That give them resources they need, from money to networking to SEL skills to community. That give them the opportunities that all young people deserve.

Responses provided by Paul Griffin, Founder and President, The Possibility Project.

TEAM B.R.O.W.N.



Team B.R.O.W.N

Are system-involved young people today presenting any different challenges than they did 10, 20, or 30 years ago, in your view? If so, in what way?

Yes, I believe system-involved young people today are facing different challenges than they did 10, 20, or even 30 years ago. I am 45 years old, and I've seen firsthand how much the world has changed. A 15-year-old growing up in 2026 is navigating a very different reality than a 15-year-old in 2011. While many of the same conditions and challenges still exist, today's youth are also facing new ones. The difference now is that there are more ways to understand these challenges and more avenues of support available to them. To be more specific, the TeamBrown Nonprofit Organization wasn't established 30 years ago. Programs like PYD 360, "The Other Way," or workshops like "Circle Up" didn't exist—spaces where young people can come together, feel safe, and openly unpack their experiences. Those kinds of environments create opportunities for healing, self-awareness, and growth.

When I was growing up, I had access to things like free lunch programs and P.A.L., which were helpful in their own way. However, those programs didn't address trauma or teach emotional intelligence. There wasn't the same focus on mental health, self-reflection, or giving youth the language to understand what they were going through. So while the core struggles may be similar, today's young people have more tools, more support systems, and more intentional spaces designed to help them process and navigate their experiences in healthier ways.

How does your organization see to it that young people with particularly challenging backgrounds and arrest/adjudication charges are able to "make it" outside of carceral placements?

Teambrown's youth-led programs help ensure that young people with challenging backgrounds, including those with arrest or adjudication histories, are able to succeed outside of carceral placements by creating an environment that is supportive, inclusive, and accessible from the very beginning.

All Teambrown youth-led programs welcome participants who meet basic eligibility requirements, such as age and proper documentation. By keeping the entry process simple and removing unnecessary barriers, the program creates opportunities for young people who might otherwise be excluded from support services.

Beyond access, the program focuses on building trust, fostering a sense of belonging, and providing safe spaces where youth feel seen and heard. Through mentorship, peer support, and intentional programming, participants are encouraged to develop life skills, emotional intelligence, and accountability.

This approach helps shift the focus from punishment to growth, giving young people the tools, confidence, and support they need to successfully navigate life outside of carceral systems and move toward positive, sustainable outcomes.

If you could give one piece of advice to the incoming administration about how to help young people with complex challenges thrive, what would it be? Why that advice?

Invest in training and professional development—both for leadership and frontline staff. At TeamBrown, we believe training is essential because it prepares staff for their roles and helps them understand the realities they may face when working with young people. It equips team members to navigate different situations with awareness, empathy, and flexibility.

Training helps condition staff to respond appropriately to a wide range of circumstances. For example, when you understand that a young person may have been in multiple foster homes, you recognize they might not have all of their documents readily available. Instead of turning them away, you're more likely to offer additional support and help them move forward. These may seem like small actions, but they have a significant impact. Being informed and intentional in your approach can make the difference between a young person being excluded or being given a real opportunity to access support and succeed.

Responses provided by Larry “Brown” Ingram, Founder, Team B.R.O.W.N



**Below are additional responses from youth participant, graduate of “The Other Way” :
Monay Lawrence**

Are system-involved young people today presenting any different challenges than they did 10, 20, or 30 years ago, in your view? If so, in what way?

I do think system-involved young people today are facing different challenges than they did 10, 20, or 30 years ago, even though some root issues haven't changed. Things like poverty, unstable housing, and exposure to violence have always been there. But now, everything feels more intense. Social media plays a huge role—conflicts don't just end when someone leaves school or their neighborhood; they follow them online, escalate quickly, and become public. I also think mental health challenges are more visible and, in many cases, more severe. There's a lot more anxiety, depression, and trauma, and not nearly enough accessible support to match that. It feels like young people today are dealing with both the same structural barriers as before and a whole new layer of pressure on top of it.

How does your organization see to it that young people with particularly challenging backgrounds and arrest/adjudication charges are able to "make it" outside of carceral placements?

From what I've seen and learned, organizations that are successful in helping young people “make it” outside of carceral placements focus on meeting them where they are instead of just punishing them for where they've been. That means building real relationships—mentors who actually understand their experiences, not just authority figures. It also means addressing basic needs first. It's hard for someone to focus on school, work, or staying out of trouble if they don't feel safe, don't have stable housing, or are dealing with untreated trauma. Programs that combine accountability with support—like restorative justice approaches, job training, and education pathways—seem much more effective than just surveillance or strict compliance rules. Giving young people a real opportunity to see a future for themselves makes a huge difference.

If you could give one piece of advice to the incoming administration about how to help young people with complex challenges thrive, what would it be? Why that advice?

If I could give one piece of advice to an incoming administration, it would be to invest more in prevention and community-based support systems instead of relying so heavily on punishment after something goes wrong. To me, it just doesn't make sense to wait until a young person is already deep in the system to offer help. By that point, the damage is often much harder to undo. If resources were put into schools, mental health services, community programs, and family support earlier on, a lot of system involvement could probably be avoided in the first place. I think the biggest shift that needs to happen is seeing young people not as problems to control, but as people who need support and opportunity to succeed.

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Are system-involved young people today presenting any different challenges than they did 10, 20, or 30 years ago, in your view? If so, in what way?

Over the past five years, youth-serving systems have faced a profound shift in both challenges and failure points. The impacts of COVID-19 pandemic were severe and enduring: disruptions to education and support networks, widespread destabilization of sleep and daily routines, and increased dependence on social media and gaming. Youth who were in middle school during lockdowns have experienced particularly acute difficulty reintegrating into structured school environments.

Under the administration of Eric Adams, these challenges have been compounded by a return to aggressive and often violent overpolicing practices reminiscent of the Michael Bloomberg era. Justice-involved youth have been funneled into systems marked by poor oversight and lack of accountability. Our lived experience and the data indicate systemic issues including inaccurate compliance reporting by probation, law enforcement leveraging probation to bypass warrant requirements for home searches, denial of timely legal access for detained youth, and extended pre-arraignment detention periods without charges.

In Kings County Supreme Court Youth Part, defense attorneys face a prosecutorial environment characterized by routine upcharging, denial of Youthful Offender status, and increased reliance on custodial sentencing; often in contradiction to stated policy reforms. At the same time, funding decisions have prioritized capital investments in detention facilities to create more beds over community-based programming and programming inside facilities, contributing to

violent conditions and instability at facilities such as Horizon Juvenile Center and Crossroads Juvenile Center.

Compounding these systemic failures, youth are increasingly impacted by overlapping crises: substance use, community violence, and poverty. In many cases, overdose deaths now outpace exposure to gun violence within peer networks. Rising youth homelessness further undermines stabilization efforts for the highest-risk populations.

Finally, incarceration environments continue to exacerbate harm. At Rikers Island, youth report the widespread use of heavy sedatives among detained youth, alongside the persistence of illicit economies within facilities, often run by staff further compromising safety, health, and long-term outcomes.

How does your organization see it that young people with particularly challenging backgrounds and arrest/adjudication charges are able to "make it" outside of carceral placements?

We Build the Block advances youth safety, stability, and long-term mobility through an integrated model centered on crisis stabilization, workforce investment, and systems advocacy.

Crisis Stabilization and Daily Functioning: We operationalize a "lifing" model that prioritizes immediate stabilization and goal attainment, including school re-engagement, employment, and housing access. This includes consistent provision of essential supports—biweekly haircuts, identification and vital documents, weekly groceries, and laundry services—paired with coordinated access to medical, vision, and behavioral health care. The model is designed to restore routine, dignity, and baseline functioning for youth in acute crisis.

Workforce Investment and Structured Programming: We invest in staff capacity to ensure high-quality, trauma-informed intervention. Staff receive ongoing supervision, executive coaching, and semi-annual leadership training through Novus Global. Programming is delivered through a structured weekly calendar that balances individual therapy, “lifying” sessions, restorative justice circles, and creative arts-based interventions. A crisis leadership framework—grounded in clear protocols and predictability—ensures continuity of care even in high-acuity situations. Daily engagement strategies, including morning goal-setting communication, reinforce routine, accountability, and youth agency.

Advocacy and System Accountability: We implement a community lawyering model to ensure that justice-involved youth are not only represented, but actively supported by the systems governing their outcomes. This includes advocating for appropriate educational placements, participating in court proceedings as part of the defense team, and producing mitigation materials (reports, videos, and evidentiary support) that advance non-carceral outcomes. Our approach centers accountability across agencies while building a robust, on-the-record case for each young person’s success.



If you could give one piece of advice to the incoming administration about how to help young people with complex challenges thrive, what would it be? Why that advice?

Policing Strategy Alignment and Community Safety: Public safety outcomes for youth require alignment between law enforcement leadership and community-based stabilization efforts. Current reliance on overpolicing strategies including gang enforcement and “quality of life” policing has demonstrable negative impacts on youth trajectories. Frequent stops, searches, and low-level enforcement actions undermine trust, disrupt engagement in school and programming, and create barriers to long-term stability.

Under the leadership of Deputy Mayor Francois, there is an opportunity to advance a policing strategy that prioritizes partnership, legality, and youth development outcomes. Current practices, particularly discretionary stops and enforcement for minor infractions, continue to expose youth to unlawful or excessive police contact, eroding confidence in both public safety systems and their own future prospects. For example, youth have been subjected to detention and search without clear legal basis, including incidents where minors were held for hours, questioned about alleged gang affiliation, and released without charges. These interactions carry significant downstream consequences: disruption to education and programming, increased legal system exposure and trauma, and the financial burden to replace phones, transportation for the arrested youth and their family members.

Low-level arrests for minor infractions (e.g., riding your bike on the sidewalk violations) impose disproportionate costs. They divert organizational resources toward legal intervention, court accompaniment, and crisis response, while destabilizing youth who are otherwise engaged in pro-social programming. Even when cases are resolved with outcomes such as an Adjournment in Contemplation of Dismissal, the immediate harms: missed school, stress, and system entanglement are substantial.

Community-based organizations are forced to absorb the operational and financial burden of these practices, including securing legal counsel, supporting families, and re-engaging youth after system disruption. This dynamic directly undermines stabilization efforts and weakens the overall public safety ecosystem. A reoriented policing strategy centered on legality, crisis stabilization, and coordination with community providers is essential to reduce harm, preserve resources, and support positive youth development.

Responses provided by Dana Rachlin, Co-founder and Executive Director, We Build The Block.





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