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REENTER INTO SOCIETY EMPOWERED

Art Empowers Incarcerated Youth

Teens in the Performing Statistics summer advocacy intensive, 2018 / *photo provided*

For incarcerated young people, art can be a vital means of self-expression, a lifeline to the world outside, and a medium through which to dream and advocate. Performing Statistics, a nonprofit in Virginia, connects youth impacted by the juvenile justice system with artists, educators and policy advocates. Together, they imagine and work toward a world where no kids are locked up.

For these youth, “[Art] is an outlet where they get to talk about the underlying pressures and pains they feel trapped in an unjust system,” Trey Hartt, Performing Statistics project director, says.

Performing Statistics offers a wide range of programs like art education, community exhibitions, parades and reentry support for alumni. The young people’s artwork is used to train local police on topics like youth perspectives, trauma-informed policy and alternatives to arrest and incarceration. Sometimes, police create artworks as well, and youth and cops’ creations are exhibited together. Performing Statistics’ young participants’ artwork is also sent to public schools to spark dialogue and action among students and staff about the school-to-prison pipeline.

“Because the art in our program is actively used to affect policy change, for many young people in our program, it is the first time they see there are adults in the community who value their voice and listen; they see that their voice matters and can make a difference,” Hartt says.

Performing Statistics' Youth Ambassador Squad is a program for alumni who receive a salary, mentorship, and life and leadership skills training. They also represent the project to the public and help guide its strategies. Keemari Johnson, a youth ambassador, says, "Art helps me to creatively express myself in a different way... it helps me brainstorm more ideas to help other youth who are incarcerated or formerly incarcerated. Something has to inspire you to get that engine running for brainstorming -- that's what art really does for me."

COVID-19 created various dangerous and traumatic conditions for locked-up youth, like a reduction or end of family visits, programming and educational classes, along with staff shortages and increased lockdowns. In light of the pandemic, Performing Statistics partnered with the Youth First Initiative and their #FreeOurYouth campaign, which calls on governors to release as many incarcerated children as possible and stop new admissions. Together, these groups created free posters that feature quotes from families. "I just want to hug my mom... We have been instructed to practice social distancing, but it's impossible to stay six feet away from other people because of the tight quarters," one reads.

One of this nonprofit's core messages is that communities should invest in support systems for youth, not incarceration. According to its [site](#), when young people in its programs were asked what would help them stay free, they talked about better education, jobs, access to quality health care, more after-school activities, mentors from within their communities, and "a chance for the world to see them as kids."

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