Supporting Maryland in Building a More Equitable Juvenile Justice System

Juvenile Justice Reform Council Meeting

December 17, 2019

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Objectives for Today

- Introduce Vera and the Center on Youth Justice
- Discuss the support Vera will provide to the JJRC
- Understand which issue areas are “top of mind” for Council Members as we begin this process
- Discuss adolescent development as one core feature informing system change
Vera Institute of Justice

Vera is committed to:

Securing Equal Justice  
Ending Mass Incarceration  
Strengthening Families and Communities
The past informs the present
Top-Down Expertise

- People who design and manage systems
- People who work in systems every day
- People who experience the impact of systems
Complementary Expertise

- People who experience the impact of systems
- People who design and manage systems
- People who work in systems every day
Setting Priority Areas / Framing the Inquiry

- Council Members
- Community Listening Sessions
- Expert Interviews
- History
- Initial Data Review

Vera Center on Youth Justice
Building Out the Analysis by Topic

- Data collaboration group
- Topical Interviews – Local and National Experts
- Policy analysis with a race equity lens
- Collaborative research methods to capture the impact of the systems under discussion
Initial Inquiry will Frame the Remaining Process

- Topics will frame the meeting agendas from April onward
- Specific topics may lend themselves to working groups
- Briefing materials, Vera presentation, expert presentation, and discussion of policy proposals
- Final drafted report
What’s “Top of Mind” for Council Members?
Adolescent Development
The brains of young people are not fully mature at age 18, they continue to develop until at least the mid-twenties.
Adolescence rivals early childhood in the amount of change and development in the brain.
Adolescence brings changes in the limbic system resulting in greater sensitivity to rewards, threats, novelty, and peers. In contrast, it takes longer for the cortical region, which is implicated in cognitive control and self-regulation, to develop.
Brain development during adolescence

“These changes in brain structure, function, and connectivity mark adolescence as a period of opportunity to discover new vistas, to form relationships with peers and adults, and to explore one’s developing identity.

...Consequently, adolescent brains are not simply “advanced” child brains or “immature” adult brains, but have evolved to meet the needs of this stage of life.”

- *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth* (National Academy of Sciences, 2019)
"Young man, go to your room and stay there until your cerebral cortex matures"
Their social context matters tremendously. Adolescents are **vulnerable**: they are affected by specifically toxic environments as well as pressures stemming from economic disadvantage and discrimination. Adolescents are **responsive and resilient**: investments and supports now can alter their life trajectory, even overcoming early adversity.

*When a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower.*

*Alexander Den Heijer*
Thank you.

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