A CREATIVE OUTLET
November 30, 2018

American Youth Policy Forum
25th Anniversary
This booklet is filled with resources, activities, and art that feature youth. We encourage you to explore the experiences, challenges, and resilience of youth involved in the foster care and juvenile justice system.

A special thank you to youth involved with the Fresh Start Program, the Center for Educational Excellence in Alternative Settings, Bellwether Education Partners, and the Arizona Foster Care Program for allowing us to feature their work.

Please note: This icon is a trigger warning and indicates the piece references sexual assault and violence.
“[Youth need] people who will support you no matter what... people like us, we don’t get that, we don’t get that often, that’s part of the reason we are where we are.” – Incarcerated youth

“I struggled with not being sure if I would ever have a family, a place to call home” – Devitta, former foster youth
Caught: The Lives of Juvenile Justice

On any given night, roughly 53,000 young people are in some form of lockup. Nearly 60 percent are Black or Latino. We all make dumb mistakes in our youth. But for these kids, those same destructive choices have a lasting impact. WNYC Radio Production "Caught: The Lives of Juvenile Justice" tells the stories of young lives forever changed by collisions with law and order.

Episode 1: "I Just Want You to Come Home" - Z had his first encounters with law enforcement when he was just 12 years old. Now, at 16, he’s sitting in detention on an armed robbery charge—his young life has been defined by cops and courts. What happens once we decide a child is a criminal? What does society owe those children, beyond punishment? And what are the human consequences of the expansion and hardening of criminal justice policies that began in the 1990s – consequences disproportionately experienced by black and brown youth.

Episode 8: "I Want Someone to Love Me Even for a Second" - Desiree is a young woman who has bounced between foster care, detention centers, and residential treatment centers since she was 10. Even though she has been the repeated victim of abuse, she says she's been made to feel like she's the problem...and she's angry about it. But she has her own ideas about how to make things better and she's making her voice heard.

Listen to the Caught podcast series here: www.wnycstudios.org/shows/caught

Children’s Bureau

"Prevention: Reorganizing Community Collaboratives"- Details how Washington D.C.’s Child and Family Services Agency (CSFA) reorganized the contracts and the services for the Healthy Families Thriving Communities Collaborative Network, which serves the city’s diverse wards.

“How can you pay attention in class if you’re worried about where you’re going to live?” – Kiani, former foster youth

Arizona Foster Care Program's 2018 K-6th Grade Student Artwork Foster Care Awareness Showcase

“Being completely independent at the age of 18 is pretty scary to think about. It’s a time in our lives when we are learning about ourselves and establishing goals for our future. It’s a time when we are ‘adults’ who still need guidance and support.” - Marianna, former foster youth
As a part of national Poetry Month, every April the Center for Educational Excellence in Alternative Settings (CEEAS) hosts “Words Unlocked,” a poetry contest for juveniles in secure settings. The theme this past year was Multiformity – the quality of existing in many different forms which speaks to the complexity of human being.

Excerpts from the poems of the 2018 “Words Unlocked” finalists are included below. You can read the full version of the poems below and access additional “Words Unlocked” poems here: www.ceeas.org/2018-words-unlocked-contest-winners/.

Jumbled

Know I am more than what I think and more that what I was
I am a sister, a daughter and someone’s love
I am so many things, a complete diversity
a criminal,
a victim,
a thief,
a sister,
a lover,
a daughter,
a fighter.
These words are my story
You can read it as so
As this is delivered, know I resisted
Nevertheless – I persisted.

Show Yourself

We adapt to our environment as we run from ourselves
Cause we hate who we are and want to be somebody else
We try to hold it in but we know we can’t contain
We feel we can’t express so instead we just refrain
We can’t be who we are, we’re too scared of the results
We can’t take the hurt from all the untruthful insults
Know we have potential, but we’re feeling like we’re worthless
Never had many sit and tell us that we’re worth it
I Am, I May, and I Will

I will change
I will break out of these chains
I will mend these relationships
I will learn
Understand, and comprehend
I will be me
And not follow a specific trend
I will succeed
Even believe, when things don’t blend
I will be different, watch me
It doesn’t matter what you say
Just stay out of my way

Who Am I?

People say I am a flower with no sun.
I am a pen with no paper.
I am the dark with no light.
I am a mouth with no voice.
I am a heart with no beat.
I am a book with no words.
I am a candle with no wick.
I am a wolf with no pack.
I am a painting with no color.

But I say I am a flower that can find its light.
I am a pen that draws on the walls.
I am the dark that has my stars.
I am a mouth that may not speak but has many thoughts.
I am a hart that believes in love.
I am a book that has begun.
I am a candle that melts not burn.
I am a wolf that fends for it’s self.
I am a painting that is one of a kind.

People can say what they want but they cannot bring me down.

I do not believe in what other people think of me because I know I can do it and I know who I am.
“In foster care, I was told when to eat, sleep and use the bathroom. Being on a college campus with complete freedom was a rough transition because I didn’t know how to manage my time, balance social and academic life, and much more.” – Nyeelah, former foster youth

“I missed important lessons because of moving from school to school and being pulled out early to see my social worker or to go to a court date or see my therapist. Because of this I was always behind in school.” – Tiani, former foster youth
As part of Youth Justice Action Month, CEEAS sponsored "Unsung, the Voices of Youth Justice," a nationwide initiative designed to give incarcerated students the opportunity to create and share songs about issues that concern them. The songs exude resilience and strength; they shout forth the hopes and dreams of incarcerated young people.

"Unsung" 2018 song finalists can be listened to here: www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL3a3OZXJqWMZJePYo1Slvgu_r8uH71Dy. Or visit www.youtube.com/ and search "Unsung: The Voices of Youth Justice Playlist"

1st Place: "Unsung" by students at Rogue Valley Correctional Youth Facility in Oregon

CHORUS
I been locked up since a young one,
Got me in these cuffs man it ain’t been no fun
Mama say she miss ‘er baby that just make my nose run
They don’t want me to speak want me to be “Unsung”

2nd Place: "System Failed"

CHORUS
It was cold in that cell
I was lost in the streets
Mama knew I raised hell
But I know I couldn’t tell
My homies wanted me at will
System wanted me to fail
In the Fresh Start Program's life skills class, a discussion was facilitated about change. The quotes below are the perspectives young men participating in the program shared.

"Change is working to better yourself and others around you." - Diallo

"I changed my life at Fresh Start by getting a diploma and a job." - Jorante

"Be open to advice in the process to change" - Ajahri

"Change is meant to be embraced." - Tykiem

"I changed a lot, I am really trying." - Shamall

"I am still a work in progress." - Emmanuel

"Fresh Start is creating a positive change for me by attempting to make me work harder and do the things I am supposed to do." - Korran
“It’s okay to be different. It’s okay to change. It’s okay to fail. You try again until you get it right. Failing doesn’t mean you don’t know how to do it. Failing means it’s the first attempt in learning. Yes, we are going to make mistakes. No, we are not perfect. Making mistakes is all a part of growing up. Keep pushing, and be the best you can be.” – Shenika, former foster youth

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“When darkness surrounds your life...create your own light. Deep inside there is one, you just have to believe that it’s there. That’s a life worth living. Abuse and neglect is not the only thing life has to offer. I believed there was something better.”

– Sophia, former foster youth
Bellwether Education Partners "Rigged" Online Game

Learn more and play the online game here:
https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/rigged

"Rigged" can only be played on a computer and is not compatible with smart phones.

Five million children and youth are cared for by our nation’s social service agencies because they’re experiencing homelessness, foster care placement, incarceration, or other challenges. And all of these young people will also show up in our schools while juggling other competing priorities.

Can you put yourself in the shoes of one of these young people? Can you successfully navigate the kinds of circumstances they regularly face, like juggling schoolwork and childcare, preparing for the G.E.D. while employed full-time, or meeting the demands of a probation officer while trying to finish a high school diploma?

Derived from real stories shared by actual students, “Rigged” is a choose-your-own-adventure-style game designed to represent the impossible tradeoffs that pit these young people’s’ dreams, desires, and responsibilities against the Wants and needs of the various adults placed in their lives to support them through difficult transitions.

With the goal of high school graduation in mind, you will be asked to complete common tasks or solve plausible problems under the constraints faced by a real student on an authentic timeline. While difficult, it is possible for you to win the game by receiving your high school diploma.
Maryland Juvenile Justice and Foster Care Youth Statistics

Matching Game

Answer key can be found on the following page.

1. Of youth placed in the Maryland juvenile system, __% identify as Black, ___% identify as White and ___% identify as Hispanic/Other.
   A. 19%

2. Of youth placed in the Maryland juvenile justice system, ___% are male and ___% are female.
   C. 13%

3. In the 2016 court dispositions, ___% received probation and ___% were committed to the Department of Juvenile Services.
   D. 3,841

4. Of the 1,142 total released youth in 2015 ___% were rearrested, ___% were reconvicted and ___% were reincarcerated.
   F. 29

5. In 2016, _____ children were in Maryland’s foster care system.
   G. 45%, 50%

6. The average length of time children are in foster care is ___ months.
   H. 44.5%, 18.8%, 13.4%

7. By age 21, ___% of foster care youth will have attained no educational degree.
   I. 5%

8. Less than ___% of foster care youth attain an associate’s or bachelor’s degree.
   J. 84.7%, 15.3%

9. By age 21, ___% of foster care youth are employed and ___% are unemployed.

10. ___% of youth transitioning out of foster care have been incarcerated by age 17.
Matching Game Answer Key

1. E
2. J
3. B
4. H
5. D
6. F
7. A
8. I
9. G
10. C

Statistic Sources

Maryland Department of Juvenile Services

Child Trends

Kids Count Data Center, Annie E. Casey Foundation