

# CALAFIA

Issue 4, Fall 2016



# WRITING THROUGH WALLS

# Calafia Issue 4 Fall 2016

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# YOUTHWIRE

## CALIFORNIA'S NEXT GENERATION OF COMMUNITY MEDIA

YouthWire, a project of New America Media, is a network of youth-led media hubs that train California's next generation of community media. Calafia is a biannual statewide youth policy journal. Thanks to our partners, The Beat Within, 916 Ink and Fathers & Families of Jan Joaquin for their submissions to this special edition Calafia.



### Editor's Note

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Mass incarceration continues to haunt the youth of California. Our current justice systems do not cultivate healing. When this system fails our youth, it fails all of us. It fails our communities and it fails our futures.

We should nurture and not punish children from an early age. Our schools should never push out students.

This publication is a call to action. Our state must invest in our youth and demolish oppressive infrastructures.

The writing and art in this issue come from young people, many of whom have come face-to-face with a juvenile justice system that confines more youth than any other developed country in the world.

These narratives from people on both sides of the walls of our justice system will not be confined; we invite you inside this edition to hear from youth as they write through these walls.

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## Sacramento Youth Writers

### Behind These Walls

Words. Group Poem.

I feel like I never get enough to eat  
Not as bad as you'd think  
Food's like school food, barely seasoned  
I'm just glad I get to eat  
Like daycare  
Sometimes I hate my life  
White undershirt, white polo shirt,  
Baggy blue pants, grey sweatshirt, all the same  
In and out since the age of twelve  
We have no say  
My favorite is biscuits and gravy  
I crave my mom's Spanish rice  
3:00, a nap in my cool air-conditioned room  
Ten minute, more like five minute, showers  
Yippeey! Today is bra exchange day  
Nasty food, but you know I be eating it  
Let me out of here!!!  
Education in here is good for me  
We have what we need, not what we want  
Oversized clothes, no style, no creativity, blue  
wannabe Vans  
Scratchy sweaters  
Once you get used to the system, it ain't that  
hard to deal with.

916 ink is an innovative, arts-based literacy nonprofit that transforms low-income and marginalized children and teens from the Sacramento region into confident writers, empathetic listeners, and, ultimately, published authors.

Since its inception in 2011, they have served over 2500 students with high-quality and high-dosage writing workshops in partnership with low-income public schools, nonprofits, foster youth programs, juvenile detention, and public libraries.

To date they've published over 65 beautiful and professional books and a creative writing

prompt kit (written by advanced teen authors for use in 6th-12th grade classrooms and is tied to national Common Core curriculum). 916 Ink is changing the trajectory of Sacramento's most vulnerable children by providing them with opportunities to not only increase their academic confidence, but also to become creative and engaged citizens who become the heroes of their own story. Learn more about them at [www.916ink.org](http://www.916ink.org).

For more in-depth information, contact, Katie McCleary, Executive Director, at [katie@916ink.org](mailto:katie@916ink.org) or by telephone at 916-826-7323.

These submissions come from The Girls of El Centro Junior/Senior High School, Units 12 and 14.

### How the Streets Started for Lacy

Words. S.G.

Lacy was on the street when she was fifteen. She was hoeing and doing drugs. She was making money to survive out there after her mom kicked her out. Her mom left her with nothing to eat and nowhere to sleep. She was hungry for three days straight, so she decided to go to her godmother's house, but never showed up.

Then it started to rain. Right on time a car pulls up and the man in the car asks, "Why are you in the rain? I got a motel just up the street; it's warm inside." Lacy got in the car and he started to drive. Minutes later he pulled up to a motel. Lacy was a little spooked, but it turns out everything was okay, that night.

The next day, Lacy woke up when John was just coming through the door, "Good evening. Do you do powda?" Lacy said no, but the room started to spin. She likes the feeling of it, so she did a couple and minutes later adrenaline filled her.

"Why were you in the cold last night?" John asked

"My mom kicked me out."

Then, John offered Lacy a job, food, and shelter.

"What do I have to do?" She asked

"It's just a little way to make money."

"I don't know . . ."

John hits her across the mouth, "Stop being so difficult, bitch."

First, she was treated like shit, then a princess from hell, and that how the streets started for Lacy.

# Stranger Danger

Words. S.G.

When I was a little girl a stranger came upon me and offered me some candy. He said, “Get in the car.” There were three people in the car. I was taught never to talk to strangers because you never know what can happen. So, I just walked away. Next thing I knew the car was following me. I was so scared-I didn’t know what to do. I ran. I was only five years old. I said, “NO, NO, NO!” This can’t be happening.” My mom was not in my life, so I had nobody to tell. I ran into my house and locked the door. The car was sitting outside across the street, waiting. I stayed and waited in my house until they left. I sat by the door and cried as the question ran through my mind: If they come back, who can I tell?

# Evil

Words. F.A.

He’s evil, I swear to you. All he is, is pure evil. His motives from the start. Preying on the weak. Seeing a pathetic opportunity and snatching me up at sixteen. I thought he was my friend. I thought he really cared. Showing me ounces and ounces of drugs when not even knowing me for an hour. Giving me shelter, warmth, clothes and food. But he knew all I cared about were the drugs. Saw I was broke. Saw I was alone. Saw I was paranoid about anything and everything. Perching up at windows watching out the cracked blinds for hours. His solution, teach her how to sell drugs. Lace her up with game. The wrong way. Never sold more than a five sack of weed my whole life, then all of a sudden given eight balls for free just to make some money. The money was good. Who knew I was a natural? Gave me watches, purses, new kicks and everything. Treating me great, he started to expect. Almost forty, he started talking to me in ways I didn’t like, scaring me from being able to leave the front door. Always being kept hidden in his room. No one was to know I was around. Telling me I’m worthless, and this is my fault, shoving washcloths down my throat. Kicks and punches. You’re 6’5 for God’s sake! Why? I did what you wanted. Why? You said you loved me. I told you I didn’t want a relationship. I told you, you’re my really good friend. Taking my stuff, leaving me with nothing, then locking me outside. I took charges for your ass. Picked up on my warrants. I got my first felony, possession over ten grams, attempt to sell. You walked away right past me, free of charges. I cried out your name. I thought you cared.

# Waste of Time

Words. P.C.

She woke up and got ready like every morning. Hopped in the shower, got dressed, brushed her teeth, And headed out for school. She walked to school like every morning, went to first, second. . . Third period her probation officer showed up, called her out of class, Asked her how everything was going at home. She answered him honestly and said there were always problems. Silence. Silence. He said “Put your hands behind your back. Your mom called me over the weekend and said you’d Runaway again.” They walked through the front office Out into the car. The ride was pure silence. He asked questions but she refused to talk to him. She felt like busting the windows out his car. Find a way to delay their way to Kiefer. But what’s done was done. There was no way out of this one. She didn’t want to go back. It was a waste of time. They said it was to protect her. Protect her from what? Getting a real education? Finishing her last year of high school? Protect her from being near the ones she loved? They arrived. She couldn’t get out of it now.

# ***The Beat Within***

***A Publication of Writing and Art from the Inside***



The Beat Within just celebrated their 20th anniversary of providing writing workshops to incarcerated youth. Starting in San Francisco's Juvenile Hall, The Beat Within now serves 5,000 young people annually across California and in 4 other states and prints a 60-page magazine bi-weekly.

The Beat Within's mission is to provide incarcerated youth with consistent opportunity

to share their ideas and life experiences in a safe space that encourages literacy, self-expression, some critical thinking skills, and healthy, supportive relationships with adults and their community. Outside of the juvenile justice system, The Beat Within partners with community organizations and individuals to bring resources to youth both inside and outside of detention. We are committed to being an effective bridge between youth who are locked

up and the community that aims to support their progress towards a healthy, non-violent, and productive life.

To stay in touch with The Beat Within, subscribe to the magazine or support their work, please use the subscription form on the back page.

## **Walls**

Words. Summer.

The Beat Within, Alameda.

If these walls could talk  
They'd tell you stories of hurt  
Sadness  
Rage  
Unanswered prayers  
And silent sobs  
These walls have had  
Pain inflicted onto them  
They have won every fight  
The kids have started with them  
They have muffled the cries  
Of newbies, homesickness and year-long sentences  
They have heard the never  
Ending prayers to be free  
Next court date  
They have seen depression  
In all forms  
They know my story  
Summer's Struggle  
These walls know how to  
Keep secrets they'll never  
Tell another soul the  
Secrets are safe in these walls

## **Not Our Addiction**

Words. Sarai.

The Beat Within, Los Angeles.

Why does no one else think this is wrong?  
We're stuck in these halls,  
Just because we are addicted to buying pookies,  
bongs, and eight-balls  
It's got us pinned up against the wall,  
They don't see that we are broken and are  
about to fall  
Why can't society see that we don't deserve to  
be treated like that,  
What we really need is rehab,  
Listen when I tell you that we need help,  
Not to be locked up in a cell  
We are not just criminals and addicts  
We are people that need help getting rid of bad  
habits.  
How many times do I have to say this, till you  
people understand us?  
Just know that nothing is going to change  
'till we are done being treated like animals.  
It's time to stop the government from putting us  
in handcuffs

## **Incarceration**

Words. Kailani.

The Beat Within, San Mateo.

Incarceration is isolation.  
The purest form of degradation.  
People all across the nation  
get locked up without hesitation.  
The modern form of segregation.  
We spend all this time locked up  
but what are we learning?  
To conceal our emotions,  
to walk in a straight line  
(always stand to the left and stay ahead of staff).  
We stay inside 24 hours a day.  
The width of our rooms is the length of our  
arms extended.  
Forget the system.

# School to Prisons Pipeline

Words. Matthew Edwards.

The Beat Within, San Quentin State Prison.

The phrase school-to-prison pipeline resonates with me because it's what my eyes lived to see. So, allow me to share what school-to-prison pipeline means to me.

As I reflect back on my schooling journey from eighth grade, ninth grade, continuation, probation continuation, the probation office, and finally prison, I understand that the bad choices I made were to get attention, fit in, and an outlet for the pain I felt and dealt. I was insecure, broken, crying out for help, but no one heard my cries disguised by: disrupting class, being the class clown, cussing out teachers, rebelling against authority, fights, and ditching school because I thought it was cool. I feel that I was pushed out and not truly cared about.

In eighth grade I was suspended several times spaced out over time, yet my grades were okay. On my last class clown infraction my principal suspended me for the last couple of months of the year. I was banned from graduation and my yearbook was mailed to me. I told the principal I didn't care verbally, but deep down emotionally I was crushed. This fueled my rebellious acting out persona.

In ninth grade, the cycle of being pushed out, low accountability, and low expectations continued. I remember checking into homeroom, going to first period, and by second period being high at a ditching party. As long as I went to homeroom or "certain classes" I could get away with a lot of ditching without my mother knowing.

I took advantage of this loophole. One time while in wood shop I was so intoxicated, the instructor told me to just sit and to stay off the machines.

As I graduated to continuation school, a probation continuation school, and finally the probation office to see my homeschool teacher/probation officer, the expectations, caring, and teaching became less and less. I think in the inner cities there is not enough accountability and not enough guidance counselors for students. The education system is so focused on getting government funding, fulfilling the requirements to get funding, that students are often neglected. So for me, the school-to-prison pipeline is a reality that I lived.

## No Jails

Words. Young EEE.

The Beat Within, Alameda.

Freedom for all  
Equality  
Happy faces  
Regardless of your race  
No tears  
Moms, Dads, Grams, Gramps, Aunts, Uncles  
and Cousins happy to have all family  
In one place  
A safe world  
No drive by shootings  
No gang violence  
No guns  
Just peace, love, understanding  
And good conversation  
To work out our differences.  
No corruption.  
Is it possible?  
Maybe.

Where do we start?  
In our homes  
With our family?  
In the schoolhouse  
With our classmates?  
On the block  
With our neighbors and friends?  
At the job  
With our colleagues?  
Or, on the bus  
With strangers?  
Sure all the above, but then again, it starts at home,  
With the love and support  
that is provided by our elders, our blood.  
On the road to no jails is a long bumpy road  
We need to destroy all guns.  
We need to destroy all weapons.  
We need to destroy this black and white world  
we live in.

We need to find new solutions when one breaks the rules.  
How to do that, I do not know.  
What do you do with haters?  
What do you do with those who know it all?  
What do you do about racism  
Classism, poverty, elitism?  
I wish I had the answer.  
Will we ever figure out a life without jails?  
Probably not, though it's fun to dream and believe we  
As a human race have the intelligence to succeed with a world without jails.  
I promise myself, I'll do my part.  
I'll teach my children through the love I give them daily,  
As I play a part in their life and that for sure will make a big difference.  
Watch!



# Merced County Jail Conditions Exact Heavy Price on Families

Words. Hannah Esqueda

Image. Victoria Castillo.

WeCed Youth Media.



After 10 days without food, Victoria Castillo took her first few bites last week. The mother of two had joined a hunger strike launched by inmates that include her husband in Merced and prisons around the nation earlier this month. The meal was not sitting well.

“I just came back from lunch. We had pho (Vietnamese noodle soup) and it was so good but now I’m not feeling so well. I had my first bit of food right now because they’re negotiating today,” she said. “They started accepting breakfast and lunch as negotiating terms.”

The “they” she speaks of are the more than 150 inmates currently protesting inhumane conditions at Merced County Jail and nearby John Latorraca Correctional Facility. Castillo is one of several community members participating in solidarity with loved ones behind bars. Her husband, Richard Castillo, is currently being held at Merced County Jail while he fights charges of evasion from police. He’s been there since early 2013 and is facing life, partially due to gang enhancements which can add years and even decades to a sentence.

The hunger strike began Sept. 9 — the 45th

anniversary of the Attica Prison uprising — and coincides with strikes at prisons and jails nationwide.

“He was arrested February 4, 2013 and I bailed him out April 19. On his second court date, which was May 28, the judge granted the DA’s request, based on [gang] enhancements, to raise his bail to over \$650,000. They took him back into custody and it’s just been crazy ever since,” she said.

The dates and figures surrounding her husband’s incarceration are forever etched into her memory and she quickly rattles off several more, including November 2014, when her husband was first placed into administrative segregation — essentially a form of solitary confinement — and June 30, 2016, when he was allegedly seriously injured by rubber bullets as part of a housing raid in the jail.

“We knew he was injured but they wouldn’t tell me if he was dead or alive,” she said. “I was in the car with my kids when I took the call and my son became so anxious. He was in tears, he was screaming because he wanted to know if his dad was alive. They wouldn’t tell us anything at the time.”

It was only later, after several dogged attempts for an official update, that she was informed her husband was alive but had sustained injuries to his head and hand. The housing raid — which Castillo says prison officials carry out once every eight to 12 months — was one of several her husband has seen over the last few years.

The practice is intended in part to remove contraband from cells. It is among the issues inmates are protesting through the hunger strike.

In addition to Richard Castillo, a handful of other detainees were injured in the June 30 raid, including one who reportedly had a stun grenade, or flashbang, go off next to his ear and another who had just turned 18. The youth had recently been transferred to the county jail facility from a juvenile detention center and was reportedly lying down when he was shot with a riot gun.

Other concerns outlined in a seven-page letter drafted by Merced County jail inmates include having daily meals meet the designated 2,000-calorie minimum, updates to food safety protocols, accountability for correctional officers at the jails and closer oversight of hiring practices.



Castillo said the letter was formally submitted to the Merced County Sheriff, Board of Supervisors and county staff on September 9.

When asked for comment on the ongoing hunger strike Captain Greg Sullivan with the Merced County Sheriff Department said jail staff are treating inmates on an individual basis.

“We talk to inmates everyday and offer them food several times each day,” he said. “It’s their first amendment right and if they don’t want to eat, they don’t have to, but eventually they’re going to be hungry enough and they’re going to eat.”

In response to the specific concerns raised by the Sept. 9 letter from inmates, Sullivan said both jail facilities are operated in full accordance with California law and safety standards.

Among the concerns outlined in the letter is a request from detainees for jail staff to end the discriminatory practice of outfitting Latino inmates in non-standard jumpsuits, which they say color-code them as gang members regardless of any official affiliation.

The department adopted the practice several

years ago and says it allows correctional officers to more easily identify and secure inmates who may pose a threat to the larger population.

But, Castillo says, the colors send a clear message to court officials.

“[Merced County Sheriff’s Department] can say it doesn’t mean anything, but when [inmates] show up to court in those green-and-white or blue-and-white striped uniforms it does signal something to the [district attorney] and to the judge,” Castillo said. “It changes how they view them, so it matters.”

General population inmates are commonly given orange jumpsuits in Merced County, while the green-and-white uniforms have come to be associated with members of the Norteño gang and blue-and-white with Sureños.

Sheriff Department officials maintain that the color classification is designed to help separate protected groups and keep inmates safe, but Castillo alleges Merced County inmates are often mislabeled as gang members based on nothing more than their zip code and ethnicity.

In the years following her husband’s incarceration, she has become well versed in the

intricacies and apparent injustices embedded within Merced’s criminal justice system. She has also worked tirelessly to change it, looking for ways to bring her husband home while affecting larger change.

That passion and drive helped lead her to the Merced Organizing Project (MOP) and its Live Free campaign. The faith-based group seeks to end the mass incarceration policies pursued in recent decades. Castillo began volunteering for MOP in 2014 and was hired full-time as a community organizer in February of this year.

“For a lot of people, it’s really hard because they don’t have money. If you don’t have money, you can’t bail out and you can’t hire a lawyer to tell them your civil rights are being violated,” she said. “For 99 percent of the people in [Merced’s jails] they’re in there because they can’t bail out.”

Her estimate may not be too far off. Recent studies have found there are, in fact, over half a million people around the country who are behind bars and awaiting trial because of their inability to cover bail, something critics say violates the principle of innocent until proven guilty.



Finding a good civil rights attorney is also difficult here because of the challenging legal reputation attributed to Merced County. Castillo said she's spoken about her husband's case with more than 50 lawyers at firms across the state. All are interested in the case, she says, until she mentions her location.

"Once they find out we're in Merced County, they don't want to touch it," she said. "They always say, 'Oh, it's too difficult in those courts,' or, 'They do things their own way over there in Merced,' and it's true. The court system here does do things their own way and a lot of people suffer because of it."

The most frequent complaint she hears from attorneys is how arbitrary the court system can be for outsiders. Attorneys often tell her how courthouse staff will keep defense attorneys waiting all day to speak to clients, a practice that is both frustrating and wastes a lot of time.

"People just tend to want to steer away from Merced County," she said. "It's kind of frustrating on my own so now I'm looking to get a class-action suit going."

The lawsuit would focus on the June 30 housing raid and Castillo is hopeful the families of other injured detainees will also join. She's also looking to bring attention to the poor medical care inmates receive through the Merced County jail system.

"My husband's hand was broken during the raid and it took them 12 days to take him to a doctor so he could set it," she said. "Two of his fingers are completely at an angle and you can still see the indentation from the impact shot."

Castillo was told pictures were taken of her husband's injury immediately following the raid but when she requested his medical records,

few years ago, she pushed for the county jail to adopt a breastfeeding ordinance for visiting families after she was nearly denied a visit for breastfeeding her daughter.

"They were punishing me for having my breast uncovered," she said. "They were discriminating against me because I'm breastfeeding when that's what my breasts are for, to nourish my baby."

After filing her complaint, Castillo said the facility passed a new rule allowing women to carry in bottles and breastfeed.

There's still a lot of ground to cover though, and Castillo said last week's negotiations for the hunger strike were temporarily suspended

because of a staffing issue with the Sheriff's Department.

"I didn't think I would make it this long on the strike, but if we have to resume then we will," she said. "It's hurting me to know that my loved one, and the family members of others, felt so desperate that they have to do this as a last resort — as a cry for help — because their grievances are not being heard."



Image. Jason, *The Beat Within*.

staff from California Forensic Medical Group, a private company contracted by the Merced County Jail, withheld the photos.

"I paid for those medical records so I could have the photos but they won't release them," she said. "I tried to fight with them on that and sent [CFMG] an email but their response was that they would follow up with my husband. All this time later and we still have not seen [the photos]."

Even with the odds stacked against her, Castillo has already helped to affect some change. A

# A Child of Incarceration

Words. Jeremiah Castillo.  
We’Ced Youth Media.

In February of 2013, my dad was arrested for evading the police. I had just turned 10 years old and was in the 4th grade. It was in the paper and I remember hearing some of the teachers at my elementary school talking about us.

The day he was arrested, my school’s principal, Mrs. Heupel walked a detective wearing a suit by my classroom and onto the playground during recess. It felt wrong, but I did not know why. When my mom picked me up from school that day she told me my dad had been arrested. We cried and cried together.

That night and many other nights I could not sleep well because I didn’t know when he would come home.

I still don’t know when he will come home.

Everyday my dad is in that jail, I fear he may die because of harsh treatment prisoners are subjected to. This month inmates in prisons around the country, including where my dad is incarcerated, went on a hunger strike to protest the cruel treatment they receive. I wanted to go on hunger strike too, but my mom says that I am too young. She has joined the strike for me and has not eaten since September 9th.

Last week, when corrections officers at the jail where my dad is tried to suppress striking inmates, my dad was hurt. After we found out what happened my mom tried to get information from the jail, but they wouldn’t tell us anything. I thought my dad might have been dead. That night was the worst so far.

I know people have died inside the jail where my dad is being held. This past July, I sent a letter to the Merced County Board of



Supervisors to look into how the Sheriff’s department is conducting raids. I never heard back.

After my dad was arrested, some kids at school whose dads are cops picked on me, saying my dad was a gang member and my family was trash. That upset me and made me really angry. Starting in the fifth grade I begged my mom to home school me, but she couldn’t because she had to work to support my sister and me.

The bullying continued throughout seventh grade. Some kids said they were told not to be friends with me because of my family.

My grades kept falling every single year and I felt like I was drowning in life. It was hard for me to concentrate or feel happy at home or school.

This year, things are different. I am attending a charter school and am no longer a part of the city school district. So far I am doing great. I can focus better and have more time to be me. But there is still a lot of pain I hold inside,

pain that stems from being a child of incarceration.

When my dad was home we did everything together. We fished, played catch, rode our bikes, and he helped me with my homework. He even taught me how to cook.

My baby sister Victoria was five months old when my dad was incarcerated. Now, she is four years old.

Since he went to jail, my life has never been the same. Our family feels so broken.

I see how much my mom struggles and my heart hurts. My sister cries for my dad until she falls asleep. She has had to spend all four of her birthdays seeing him in jail through glass. It’s not right. I wish we could give him a hug.

My dad is still fighting his case. They want to give him LIFE. They say he is a gang member and a bad person, but to me, he has always been a great dad and a good husband.

Like a lot of people in Merced – a city known for criminalizing its young people instead of investing in them – he had a hard time growing up. So although the court system and law enforcement label him one way, I know they are wrong about my dad.

I am hoping my story will open eyes and soften hearts and bring attention to the plight of prisoners. When our loved ones suffer, we suffer too.

I will never regain all the years I have missed out with my dad, and neither will my little sister. Incarceration has permanently scarred me for life.

# Q&A: Prop. 47 and Crime -- Researchers Share the Facts

Words. Olivia Rodriguez.  
Coachella Unincorporated.

*Editor's Note: A new report from the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice (CJ CJ) found no correlation between the passage of Proposition 47 and the overall increase in reported crime in California in 2015. The 2014 law allows individuals to reclassify certain non-violent felonies to misdemeanors and requires that the state reinvest savings from those reduced prison populations into prevention programs. Coachella Unincorporated spoke to Mike Males, CJ CJ senior research fellow, and Erica Webster, communications and policy analyst, to discuss their study's findings. Responses have been edited for clarity and length.*

**The study states that there was “no correlation between county changes in criminal justice facility populations and urban crime.” Can you explain what that means?**

Mike Males: We did a study on cities based on data for the first half of 2015, which is when Prop. 47 [went into effect]. We didn't find any relationship between cities that were in counties that had a lot of releases or reduced sentences under Prop. 47, and their change in crime from 2014 to 2015. We repeated the analysis for all of California's counties, and we found the same results. The counties with the largest impacts from Prop. 47, in terms of returned or released

inmates for reduced jail populations, did not have the biggest increases in crime.

**How has Prop. 47. impacted young people in particular?**

MM: The initiative reduced criminal penalties for property and drug offenses for all ages from felony and misdemeanors. It allowed youth who had been convicted of felonies and these offense categories to petition to review some of their misdemeanors or reduce their sentences, and in some cases to obtain release if they had been incarcerated. Also, in terms of arrests that are taking place now, these are now misdemeanors instead of felonies.

**What did the data look like in Riverside County?**

MM: From 2014 to 2015, Riverside County had an 11 percent decrease in its jail population and a 33 percent decline in total facility population, which includes releases from state prison. The state average was 31 percent, so it's a little above the state average. So Riverside County had a relatively large impact. Some, probably most, of this we think was due to Prop. 47, but unfortunately we don't have the breakdown on what went into that jail population decrease.

**Why are the findings of this study significant?**

MM: California is in a juncture where it simply cannot increase its incarcerated population. The courts have told us that overcrowding of the state prison system and maltreatment of inmates in state prison systems must be ended with reductions in prison population. The state has responded to that by reducing prison populations by more than 30,000 in the last four years to meet the court order. The voters have boasted, “We're not gonna build more prisons.” We are finding that prisons are not really rehabilitating people. So we add all those things up, and we want to see more treatment at the local level.

EW: Our [study's] audience includes policymakers and legislators who want to draft criminal justice reforms or reduce California's reliance on incarceration. There's an element of fear mongering when it comes to criminal justice reforms. A lot of interested parties might claim that all these different policy reforms are going to cause an increase in crime, particularly an increase in violent crime. So we want to address those statements and gauge their factualness. We want to be able to bring that truth to the legislators and policy makers.

## Prop. 47 Can Turn 2016 into the 'Year of Mercy'

Words. Joey Williams.  
South Kern Sol.

*P*ope Francis has declared 2016 the “Year of Mercy,” and that could not be more true for hundreds of people across California who are being redeemed by Prop 47. I'm not Catholic, but I am a man of faith who subscribes to the Gospel teachings of liberty and freedom from oppression.

Prop. 47 reclassifies certain non violent, non sexual and low level felonies to misdemeanors. The law also requires that counties redirect the money saved from housing smaller prison populations toward prevention and community health services.

While law enforcement agencies in the Central Valley warned that a rise in crime and

recidivism would result from Prop. 47, statistics show that statewide fewer than five percent of inmates released under Prop. 47 have returned to prison.

I write this because, as an organizer with Faith In Action (FIA) Kern County and now its lead organizer and director, I helped organize the effort to pass Prop. 47. FIA Kern County

contacted thousands of voters and encouraged them support second chances, and Prop 47 passed in 2014.

I am also a direct beneficiary of Prop 47.

In 1998 I was arrested for a misdemeanor offense. Upon my arrest and booking in Kern County Jail I was found with a small amount of methamphetamine (less than a gram). Under California law these cases are known as wobblers, and it's at the District Attorney's discretion whether to pursue them as felonies or misdemeanors.

The District Attorney decided to pursue my case as a felony, and I was sentenced to a year in jail, one year in a residential substance abuse program and three years of felony probation. As a young father of a newborn daughter I pleaded to the felony charge, no contest, and was allowed to do the program first and then modify my jail sentence. I entered a faith based program called Teen Challenge and successfully completed the program, and my one year jail sentence was dismissed.

As a freshman at Foothill High School in Bakersfield, I was one of two Brown (Chicano/ American Indian) students in the GATE program and faced daily racial tensions from students and administrators. It was not unusual to get into fights

with white supremacists, stoners and cowboys at Pioneer Park on a given afternoon. I was kicked out my freshman year and was sent to Highland High School, located smack in the middle of a gang war zone. I was soon arrested again, this time after being jumped by four students from different hoods.

I was eventually expelled, and spent the next several years in and out of various schools. Ultimately I ended up taking a full load of night classes, and graduated the summer of my senior year at East High in July 1995.

By the grace of God, a good church, and extended family I never did see the inside of one of the 22 prisons here in California. In 2003, I left to Santa Barbara and enrolled in community college there, earning a 4.0 my first semester. I became the Associated Student Body President, a MEChista and EOPS Peer Advisor. Returning to Cal State Bakersfield in 2007, I

graduated with a Bachelors degree in History and a minor in Political Science.

I became a youth pastor in Southeast Bakersfield in 2008, working with kids facing the same challenges I did. It was at this time FIA Kern County recruited me to organize on their education team, then focusing on students at South High, which at the time had one of the district's highest dropout rates at 25 percent.

I believe it was the my faith community, drug treatment, and school intervention counselors that saved my life. These are the institutions that Prop. 47 dollars should fund, not more investment in policing and jails – which is a concern among advocates of Prop. 47, and is completely contrary to the redemptive nature of the law.

The journey to redemption was paved by the mercy of California Voters. My felony was

reclassified to a misdemeanor in September of 2015, thanks to assistance from the Kern Public Defender's Office. Let's make sure the law continues to live up to the Pope's declaration.

The deadline for Prop 47 felony reclassification has been extended to November 2022. If you or someone you know is seeking information on the law, or if you would like to set up an info session for your church, school or neighborhood, please visit [myprop47.org](http://myprop47.org).



Image. *The Beat Within.*



# Stress: To Be or Not To Be

Words. Raheem Ballard.

The Beat Within, San Quentin State Prison.

On a day-to-day basis I try not to let the stress of my environment and circumstances overwhelm me. There are highs and lows, and some days are far better than others. After nearly twelve and a half years of incarceration, I have become numb to a number of things: extreme violence, racism, isolation, and the lack of love to say the least. However, my insensitivity to these things has since been replaced by some of the biggest stress factors of all. These factors include the gradual loss of my identity, the possibility of dying in prison, and losing the ones I love while incarcerated.

It all started upon my initial arrest. I was stripped of my personal belongings, clothes, and then put in a jumpsuit that didn't belong to me. In fact, it had probably been worn by someone else who found themselves in my situation. Then, my name was combined with a number that represented a long line of people who had been arrested before me. I am much more than this jumpsuit and county jail number, I thought to myself. And when I was sent off to prison, that county jail number was replaced by a new number. It is a number that I must repeat to myself to receive mail, to see a doctor, and sometimes to eat: "my name is Ballard, and my number is V-53410."

I've come to learn that I'm not alone in the stress that I have become accustomed to dealing with; there are hundreds of incarcerated men and women who share these concerns. As I struggle to redefine myself in this new age prison industrial complex, I'm reminded every day that my identity is under constant threat. Those in control want me to believe that it is an identity, which no longer belongs to me. I can never allow this to be true; my identity is mine alone, it's unique, ever growing, and it can never be bottled up or contained. Still, I stress about it.

Another contributing factor to my stress is the possibility that I can actually die in prison. Since being in here, I have lost count of the people that I have known who have died. This includes guys who have committed suicide, who have been murdered, and who have died due to natural and terminal illnesses. For me, the frightening part about this isn't just worrying about what's on the other side, it's being chained to a bed with nurses around who don't care whether I live or die. Bear in mind, this is in the absence of those closest to you. Imagine for a moment what that would feel like. How would you feel not being able to say goodbye to your mother, father, son or daughter?

With each passing day I am also reminded that my life isn't important as those who have been entrusted to detain me. This bothers me deeply because my life and the life of all people matter; I breathe, bleed, smile and cry just like them. Life is truly sacred, and the life of one man or woman should never be depreciated due to their condition of confinement. I try to tell myself that "Death is inevitable wherever you are," but still I stress about it.

Unfortunately, it doesn't just stop there. If you happen to die in prison, and no family member can afford to bury you or claim your body within a certain period of time, the state will cremate you (put you in a fiery furnace). Can you imagine what it would feel like to die a slow death, knowing that you're not going to have a funeral? Would this affect your self-esteem? Would your attitude about life still be the same?

Next, the harsh reality of losing your loved ones while incarcerated is inevitable. If you think that it can't, or won't happen, think again. Take a brief moment to reflect on those who are closest to you right now. Is it your mother, father, sister or brother? By far, this is one of the most painful

things an individual will have to experience while incarcerated. The death of my father in 2001, took a huge toll on me. Just a year later I was arrested for 1st degree murder. However, at the time, I was fortunate enough to make his funeral.

With my mother in her second bout with cancer, I know that she's living on borrowed time. I don't think there is a day that goes by where I don't think about her. Moreover, I think about my absence at a time when she needed me most. This includes lending her a hand when she needs one, and being able to make her funeral if she passes away with me still in here. My mother has been "my rock", one of my main supporters throughout the duration of my incarceration. This absence on my behalf, leaves an empty feeling deep within my soul; it's a feeling of insignificance and helplessness. If you find yourself in a similar situation, take a moment to think about the person or group of people who are most dear to you.

Losing those I love and hold dear to me is something that I try not to think about every day. Nevertheless, it's an unavoidable thought that no man or woman in my shoes can escape; at every turn it is there. Although I've watched most of my latest loved ones grow in photographs that have been sent to me over the years, they are dear to me because they represent the future of my family. It is a future that I have been far removed from for over a decade. Losing them would be equivalent to losing a part of me. They are young, energetic, and have promising futures. I tell myself that they will be okay, but still, I stress about it.

# My Thoughts

Words. B.

The Beat Within, San Francisco.

Some Days I feel normal like when I am going to school and leaving for work to make burritos. Other times I feel like the most wanted, having to sneak into my own home, day by day for a change of clothes and other necessities. To go on about my day before the police come and do their routine check.

Being on the run isn't easy. It feels as if the world is weighing down a ton on your shoulders and everybody expects you to fail. It's like all eyes are on you and you have to constantly look over your shoulders wondering who knows you and hoping the police don't see you or do random checks because every time a fake name isn't going to work.

Some people don't even last a day on the run but me I lasted six full months and every day and second it was hard hoping I'd make it another night with my freedom. Every day was getting worse since the older I become the harder they look. I hate to complain because people would say it's my fault or that I put myself in that situation, but this is the only way I can explain or express myself because a closed mouth can never be heard.

I was never given a chance to be home I was always sent away (by the system), having to hear the news on the outs that my mom needed gas money and that's why she couldn't see me, or a close friend was injured. Plus, dealing with the stress of the PO talking about his expectations and what he is going to do if you don't succeed.

It truly felt like I had no other choice but to go on the run, not to lay around all day on a pillow, or post on a friend's couch, but to actually show people I can better myself so I took it upon myself to go to school and work while on the run.

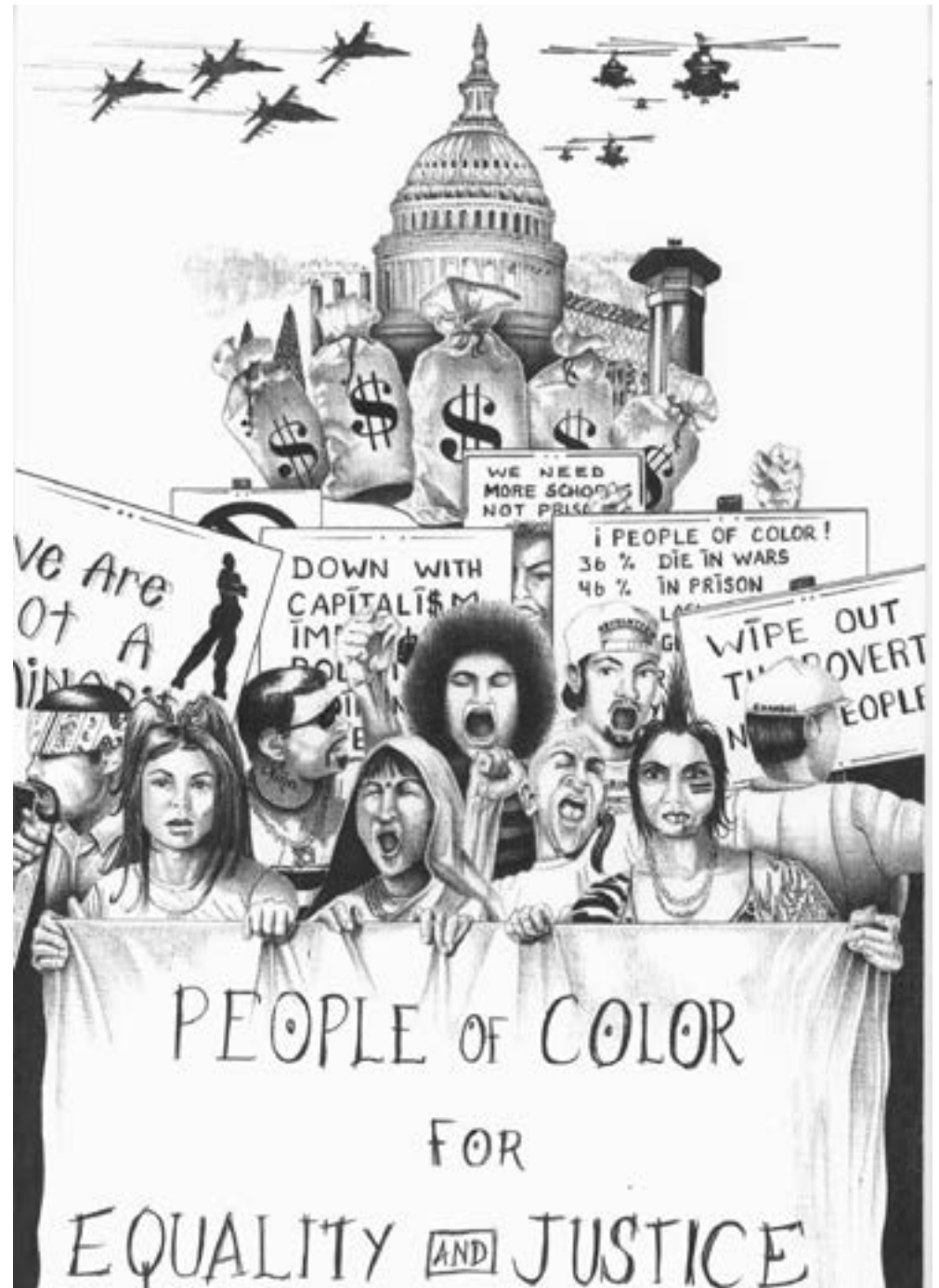
I felt good about myself proving the system

wrong and getting a real legitimate job. My first real job. I was really proud of myself. Like I actually had something going for myself and just when I thought things were going good my life took a turn for the worse. I found myself in the back of a police car and it seemed as if everything I worked so hard for was going down the drain right before my eyes.

I tried everything I could to prevent that. I ran with all my might. I was desperate. I was slowly running out of options with all my might. When I was arrested, I kicked out the police window and attempted to get away. I tried everything. I tried going out feet first then head first. I felt my body getting hot as more officers barricaded the window to my escape. I never intended to hurt anybody. My only goal was getting away and making it safely home but as they dragged me out from the window by my arms and legs I held my head down and began to think it's all over.

Everything I worked so hard for is a waste. Once again I let everybody down.

Now I'm sitting in juvenile hall thinking about the hard times being out there was because being on the run really isn't easy. It was really me against the world.





# “It wasn’t automatic, wanting to leave this lifestyle”

Words and Images. Jarrett Ramones.  
The kNOw Youth Media.

Editor’s note: Carlo DiCicco is a father and community advocate in Fresno, CA. His work as a mentor and as a parent would not be possible today without California legislation from the

past few years that allowed him to remove a felony from his record (Penal Code 1203.4 and Prop. 47, namely). The positive effect of these second chances goes beyond helping only

the individuals. As this story, told by DiCicco, shows, second chances help families and whole communities.



Growing up, my friends and I were all about having fun, hanging out, and going to parties. We were a party crew.. We weren't worried about the gang-bang issues. We were just having fun.

We started getting confrontations with folks we used to be cool with. We started getting jumped over girls.

They catch somebody on their own... you were going to get jumped. That began and started the whole spiral. If you jump us we are going to defend ourselves and once we triggered that mindset it made it easier to get involved with other aspects of being out on the streets.

That's when we went from being a party crew to fully committing to being a street gang.

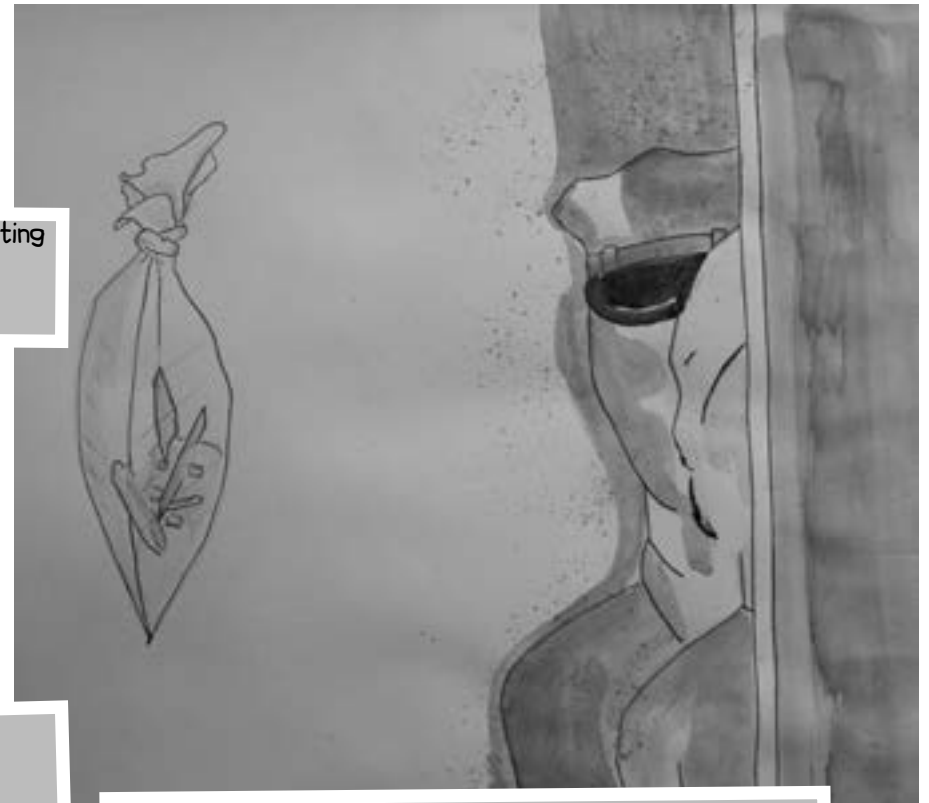
When me and my wife got together, we had moved into an apartment, June of that year.

It was kind of a normal Saturday. As I was getting ready, I was waiting on my wife, she was doing her hair, then I heard a knocking on the door and I knew.

The police came up saying they were here on a noise disturbance. I said let me go turn down my radio. I went and turned it down and stayed on the inside of the door and they were on the outside.

They told me for safety they wanted me to come outside and pat me down. I knew I had stuff in my pockets so I said, "Nah, I'm not on probation, not on parole, and I don't have warrants."

As soon as I handed them my I.D. one of them grabbed my arm, they yanked me I went into the doorframe the next thing I knew I was already getting handcuffed and they were doing the pat down.



I was 21, charged with possession of methamphetamine, narcotic sales, and possession of an illegal weapon.



My baby was about to be born at that point. Our doctor told me it was going to be a little girl. That's when my head started spinning like, "Is this what I'm going to continue to do?"

I was thinking of my friends who were in and out of prison and their kids were told "daddy's on vacation" and how their kids were used to it.

Sitting back, going through my brain, "That's my little girl. I'm gonna have a baby."

It didn't sit right with me.

So, I put myself in a dad's program, a program for young fathers. It helped build a connection and make me really understand that I didn't want to leave my little girl.

In the back of my brain I remembered what my dad raised me with. All my life, up until about 5 years ago, he always drank. Even though he was a functioning alcoholic and drunk a lot he still got up everyday to go to work. We lived in an area that was good and we had what we needed.

I was incarcerated for my daughter's 1st Christmas. I just remember that I had a little purple stuffed animal to give to her, through the glass.

It wasn't automatic, wanting to leave this lifestyle. But I knew I had to do what was right for my baby.



I spent 11 months on bail then copped a plea. My lawyer got me in a courtroom with a judge that he had good relations with.

A friend of mine was already working with a community organization. He asked me if I wanted to help out and volunteer. I said I'd give it a try.

Working in the community connected me back to what my parents were trying to teach me when they were bringing me up. About what was important in life. It gave me the opportunity to see that there was more beyond gangbanging. That there were other opportunities.

But some of those opportunities were still out of my reach. When my son played football, I was denied the chance to volunteer to help coach the team due to my record.

For 17 years I lived with the consequences of my decisions. Then because of California Penal Code 1203.4 I was told that I could apply to have my record cleaned. So I did.

Now, I'm a mentor to young men and I can coach my kids freely.



Fathers & Families of San Joaquin is based in Stockton and their mission is to promote the cultural, spiritual, economic and social renewal of the most vulnerable families in Stockton and the greater San Joaquin Valley.

For more on FFSj visit their website at <http://www.ffa.org>.

**Every  
\$1.00**  
San Joaquin county spends  
on parks & recreation,  
**it costs  
\$5.68**  
on incarcerating youth.

## I Really Want to Change, but It's Going to Be Hella Hard

Words. Raul, Nikki Chan.

Images. Nikki Chan.

Fathers & Families of San Joaquin, Stockton.

I remember one of the first things I stole was a churro from the paletta man in my neighborhood. He chased me down with a stick. I was in 5th grade. From there it would get worse.

School never helped me learn. When I was in kindergarten, I couldn't even add. Even now, I have to add with my fingers. Without education, what do I do? I can't get a job. I'm not going to get better. I figured the only way for me to survive was to go to the streets.

I was 14 when I first got locked up, the longest I've been in there was 2 weeks.

First time I got locked up was for assault and battery. There was a group of us that jumped this kid. But I'm the one that went down for everyone. I wasn't going to snitch.

The second and third time was for violation of probation and gang enhancement. They never found proof that I was in a gang, but they raided my room and found weapons, like knives.

Getting locked up is mental. Not a lot of people can take it. People break down.

One time while we were eating and I heard one of my hardest homies sniffing. I turned around but didn't see any tears. Then I heard him breathing heavier and heavier. I asked what was wrong and he said his mom just got in a car accident. His dad is in jail, too. They got locked up together. His dad is not there to take care of his mom. His mom has to wear a neck brace and can't visit him. He just starts breaking down and crying. I can't do anything. One of our other homies said, "You can't be crying in here. If you gon' cry, you got to move to another table. We're not having that." That's what being inside makes you. You can't even care for a friend.

You have to be strong. You have to hold your own.

But now, I don't have to see my parents in a visiting room. I don't have to see them behind a glass. I could actually see my mom everyday

now. I know my mom is disappointed with me. But I'm just happy to see her everyday.

I really want to change, but it's going to be hella hard. Right now, I'm trying to get my shit together, but I don't know what's going to happen.

I want to go back to a regular high school. Currently, I'm going to an alternative school so I'm only there from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. Part of my probation is to stay in school. I've been on probation for a year now and I have one more to go. Most people usually stay on until they are eighteen.

But anything can make me go back to juvie. For example, if a probation officer sees my teacher just talking to me outside of class, the probation officer might assume that I'm in trouble and can send me back. Any little thing can get me sent back. That has to change. I need a path to help me stay out of trouble, to get on track. The system should help me, not keep me locked up.

**In Stockton Unified School District, there are 35 police officers and 9 nurses.**



# What is Prop. 57?

Prop. 57 promises to reverse years of 'tough on crime' policies that disproportionately impacted communities of color. There are currently some 127,000 inmates, including 20,000 convicted for drug and property crimes, who could benefit from the law's passage. Prop. 57 is supported by Gov. Jerry Brown.

- +Allows non-violent felons who have completed their base sentence to be eligible for parole.

- +Provides credit for good behavior to non-violent felons.

- +Gives judges discretion in determining whether to try juveniles in adult court.

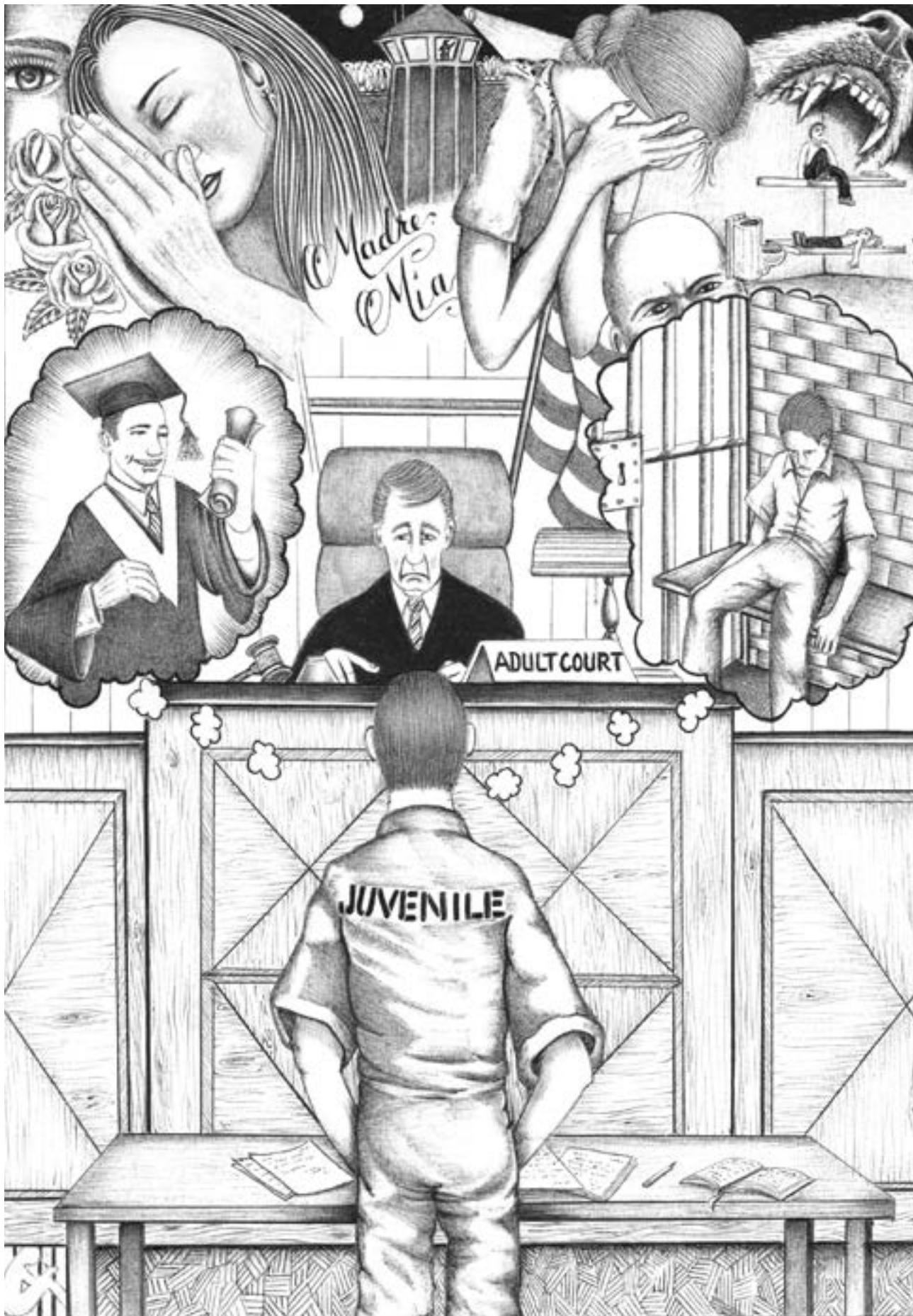


Image. M. Russell, *The Beat Within*.



# Q&A: Prop. 57 Authors Discuss Law's Promise of Hope and Opportunity

Words and Image. Claudia J. Gonzalez.  
We'Ced Youth Media.

*Editor's Note: As a formerly incarcerated woman and now a criminal justice reform activist, I was overwhelmed with emotion when I first read about Proposition 57. I immediately thought of my older brother, who at 17 was sentenced as an adult to life in prison. When I lost him to the system, I also lost a part of myself. My life was forever changed. It's an experience the bill's co-authors know all too well. George Galvis, the executive director of Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ), and Frankie Guzman, the Juvenile Justice Staff Attorney at the National Center for Youth Law, say Prop. 57 will overturn decades of CA policy that criminalize youth, and that at its core the law is about self-healing, hope, and compassion.*

## What inspired you to write Prop 57?

Guzman: My brother was prosecuted as an adult when I was five years old. It changed my life's trajectory. I grew up to commit a crime that could have easily put me in the same situation. Prop. 57 deals with correcting a major flaw in the justice system. Prosecuting kids as adults is the greatest harm done to young people by the state of California.

Galvis: For me this was deeply personal. As a young person I was incarcerated, and charged with multiple felonies. I could be doing 15 years to life right now, but I received a number of breaks that allowed me to transform my life and give back to my community. But unfortunately, there are not enough alternatives to incarceration ... [California] is number one in prison spending and second to last in education. This has got to change. We want young people to be leaders, not end up in prison.

## Opponents call Prop. 57 a "soft on crime" bill. What is your response to that?

Guzman: There is nothing "soft" about giving

judges the discretion to make decisions. It is fair. Prosecutors have a problem with losing their power, which is why they are so opposed to this bill. Too much power in the hands of prosecutors is not a good thing. Additionally, prosecutors generally do not have any insight when it comes to rehabilitation. If judges have discretion, sentencing would look a lot different because they are not solely focused on convictions like prosecutors are.

Galvis: It is typical of the opposition to deem a progressive reform bill as "soft on crime." This is a 'smart on crime' bill. It is also common sense, especially since juveniles belong in juvenile court and we should have never allowed them to be direct filed into the adult court system. There has to be investment and

are black and brown kids. Prop. 57 would help correct this injustice.

Galvis: Young people understand injustice. They want to see change just like we do. We need to stop the shackling of young people. It should be change, not chains. Schools, not prisons.

## Do you think Prop. 57 will help to reverse the 'super predator' mentality that continues to surround youth in this state?

Guzman: There is no such thing as "super predators." Over the past 15 years, Prop. 21 [which passed in 2000 and allows youth to be tried in adult courts] has caused the destruction of young lives, families, and communities throughout the state. We need to stop being so draconian and instead embrace hope and opportunity. Kids have a lot of challenges. Many have a serious history of trauma, and have grown in turmoil. It is unjust for the state to prosecute them and punish them so severely. I don't want young people to think we do not care for them. We do, and we need to start emphasizing self-healing and compassion.

Galvis: People who supported Prop. 21 and called young people "super predators" are

now acknowledging they were wrong. In the last few years, there has been a political shift. Many young people and adult allies have put a lot of effort into building a movement for social change. We are not thinking about November, we are thinking about past November. This is about liberating the dreams of young people and ensuring they are no longer persecuted. We've been in a very dark place. It's time to move past that.



opportunities plus fundamental change in order to address the state of mass incarceration we are in.

## There is evidence that younger voters support the bill. Why do you think that is?

Guzman: I think young people understand what is at stake. Every year, we have around 1,000 kids who are prosecuted as adults; most of them

# 'I'm able to vote.' -- How Those with Felonies are Casting a Ballot This Election, Even From Jail.

Words. Crystal Niebla.  
Image. Michael Lozano.  
VoiceWaves Long Beach.

The election is just around the corner and Long Beach resident Kevin Caesar isn't sure if he can vote. The 55-year-old just got off probation and says that while he plans to register he's not sure whether his record will prevent him from casting a ballot.

"I'm wondering, am I able to vote now? Even though I'm a felon?" he asked.

Recent legislature aims to clear the air on whether people with felonies can vote after years of confusing laws have left many Californians scratching their heads.

Assembly Bill 2466, signed by Governor Brown on Sept. 28, clarifies that those with low-level felonies in county jail or on probation can vote.

While the California constitution excludes the "imprisoned" from voting, AB 2466 clearly defines imprisoned as serving time in state

Vermont and Maine have no voting restrictions on individuals with criminal records.

About one in every 40 American adults cannot vote due to felony disenfranchisement. But that rate soars to 1 in 13 for African Americans, according to The Sentencing Project.

"It is worth noting that in a lot of states, these laws were actually put into place specifically to disenfranchise people of color," said Raúl Macias, an attorney at American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in San Diego, who tied these trends to the Jim Crow era. "There's a legacy of that," said Macias.

For Macias and others, AB 2466 is a welcome relief clearing up a lot of the confusion that for many incarcerated or formerly incarcerated people also proved to be a stiff barrier to voting.

"It's what we call 'defacto' disenfranchisement -- that people are not voting because of confusion

were being misinformed. People didn't realize that they still had the right to vote," Howard said, adding that many who register are surprised and excited.

"They actually want to register," Howard added. "They are excited about getting some of the things on the ballot passed." Of particular interest is Proposition 57, said Howard, which is a measure that would increase chances of parole for those with nonviolent felonies.

Howard hoped to have as many people in jails possible registered on time. She lamented that the request process to register jail inmates has, at times, been bureaucratic, but her team recently reached an agreement with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department to streamline the process.

All of Us or None activists have registered more than 1,400 voters inside jails since 2012, but still, Howard worries.

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## "But today I live. I'm able to vote."

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prisons -- and not county jails. It also recognizes that those sent from state to county jails under the Criminal Justice Realignment Act of 2011 can -- in fact -- vote.

Since the Realignment Act's passing, confusion had grown over whether prisoners in jail under the act were allowed to vote. But advocates long knew those rights were in place with some going as far as heading into jails to register inmates in past years. In light of swirling questions, all AB 2466 did was make voting rights clear.

Still, California continues to prohibit those in state prisons or on parole from voting. Illinois and Oregon deny suffrage only for those in prison, The Sentencing Project reports, while

around the law," Macias said. "[There are many] people who mistakenly think they are ineligible."

To correct the misconceptions, Amber-Rose Howard, a Long Beach community organizer at All of Us or None, a grassroots civil and human rights organization, goes the extra mile by distributing filled-out registration cards to prisoners in county jails alongside other Long Beach and Los Angeles activists. They register between 20 to 60 voters per visit at the Men's County Jail in Los Angeles or the Century Regional Detention Facility in Lynwood, among other sites.

"People inside and people in the community

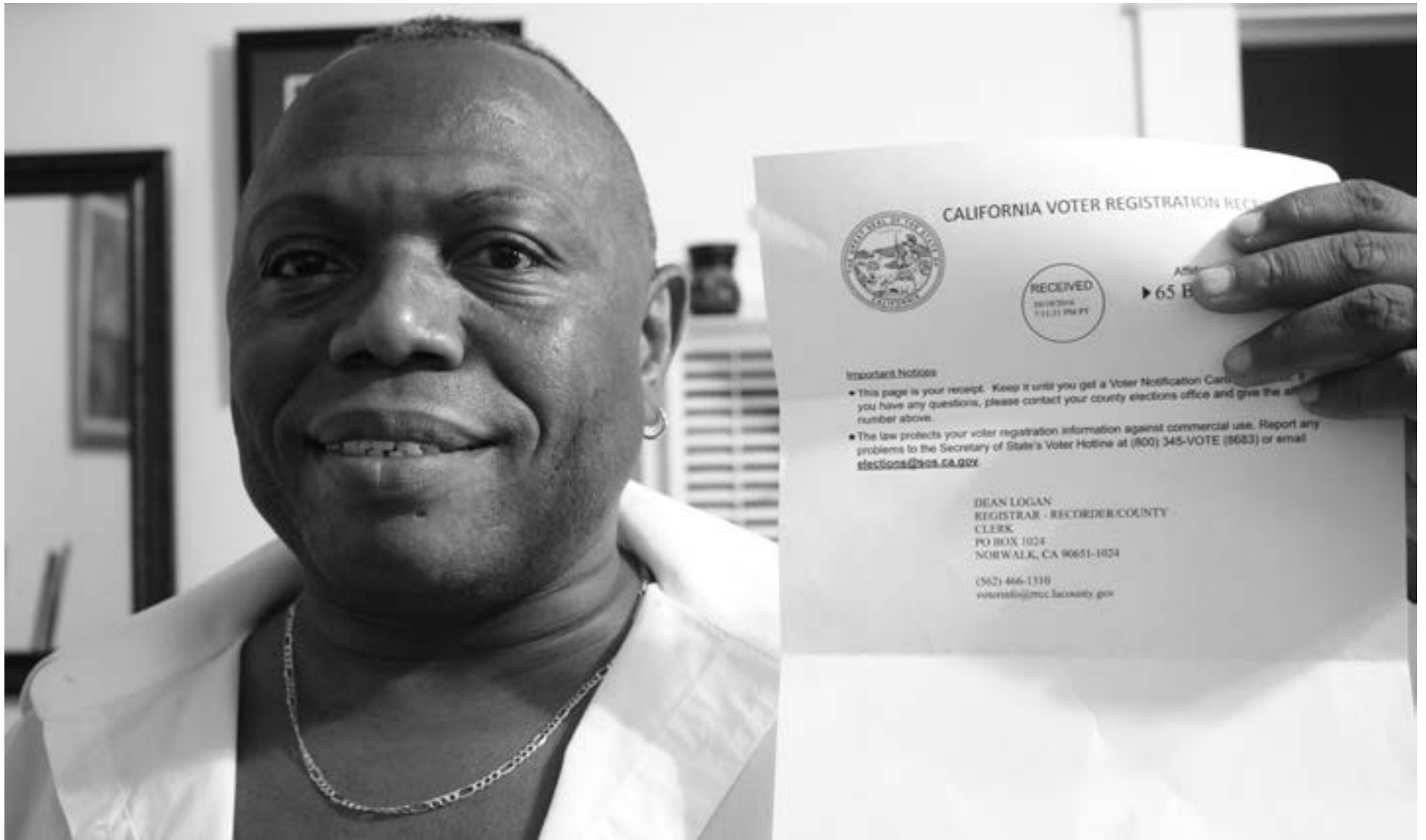
"We haven't even scratched the surface," she said, adding that there are 16,000 people eligible to register in Los Angeles County Jails.

Now that there are clarifying laws and renewed momentum among advocates to extend voting in California, it may lead to a higher voter turnout this election year. Voting has also shown to be associated with reduced recidivism, as mentioned in a 2013 ACLU and Sentencing Project report.

"They are going back and undoing some of the damage. They are giving us a chance to heal our communities," Howard said.

But some do not entirely agree with granting





those with low-level offenses voting rights. Some law enforcement leaders argue that it's been traditional to lose one's right to vote while behind bars for committing a "serious crime" and then regain that right after serving time.

"We believe that there have to be consequences to your action, and the consequences of being a convicted felon are that you can't vote," said Kern County Sheriff Donny Youngblood, President of the California State Sheriffs' Association, to The Los Angeles Times after AB 2466 was passed.

"So many of us are locked out of the political process because of a criminal background," Howard said, arguing that those stuck in the criminal justice system should have a say on

issues that impact them; to make sure "we don't have another 20 years of the War on Drugs."

This election year alone there are 17 ballot measures that could have a direct impact on people behind bars, including two that seek to repeal the death penalty and legalize marijuana.

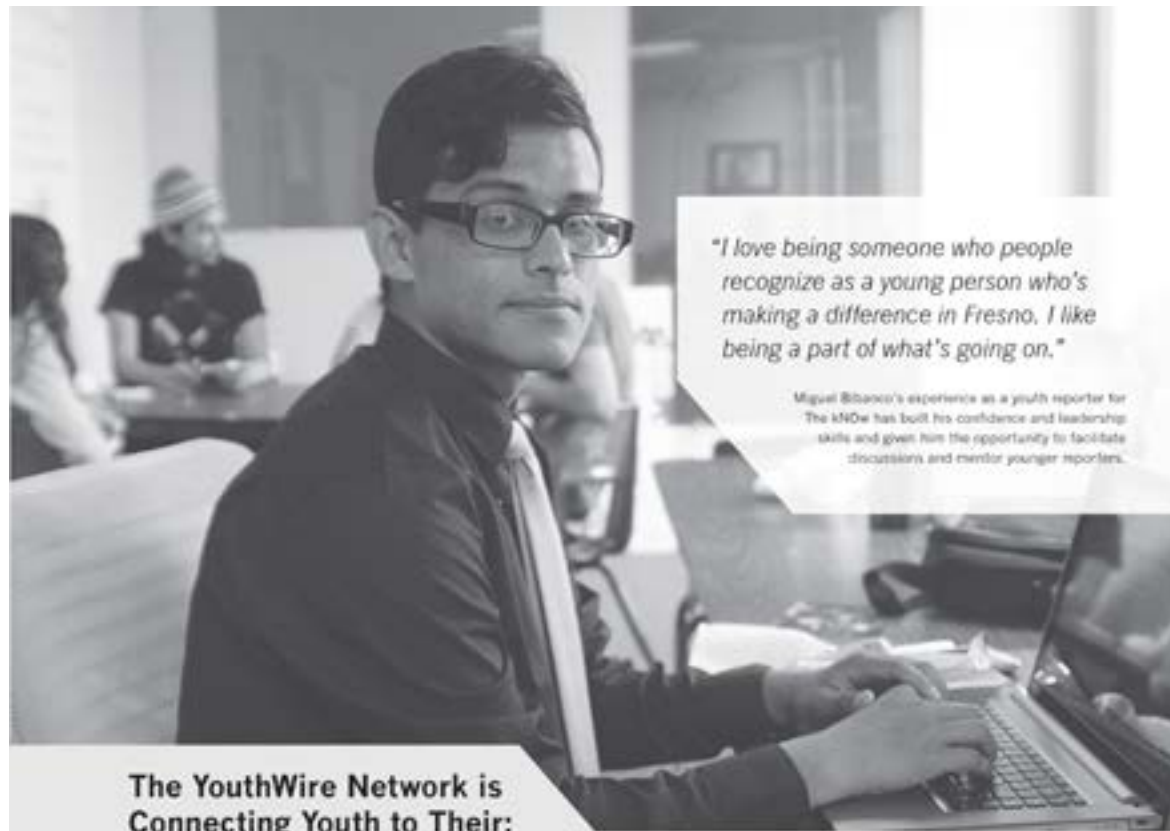
That last one hits close to home for Kevin Caesar, who spent decades in and out of prison for using and selling crack cocaine. In 2011 he was sentenced to 10 years in state prison after failing a drug test that found marijuana in his system.

"I just smoked a joint," he said, which had baffled his overseeing officers in state prison. "The system put me into jail for 10 years," he

told them.

Caesar was released early last year for good conduct. Now a free man and five-years-sober, Caesar is just one of many thousands who thought that while on the outside they couldn't vote. But after being given the right information, his smile becomes wide. His large, round, dark-brown eyes twinkle with excitement as he realizes had been able to vote since his release last year.

Days after applying, his proof of voter registration arrives by mail. "I feel free because I've been in the [wrong] lifestyle for so long," he said. "It's kept me from everything. But today I live. I'm able to vote."



*"I love being someone who people recognize as a young person who's making a difference in Fresno. I like being a part of what's going on."*

Miguel Bbacco's experience as a youth reporter for The KNOE has built his confidence and leadership skills and given him the opportunity to facilitate discussions and mentor younger reporters.

**The YouthWire Network is Connecting Youth to Their:**  
Community  
School  
Careers  
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