



A Reflection With HRFK: Fall 2024-Spring 2025

By Vivian Conway

Most semesters, Human Rights for Kids brings on undergraduate students from various universities to intern with HRFK, assisting with various projects to get experience with a nonprofit organization and learn more about the issues that face children in the justice system. Starting this year, we're giving them the chance to look back on their experiences and provide their insights and experiences from their time with us. We hope these reflections provide insight on the problems that children face, from the voices of the incredible young people we've had the opportunity to bring onto the team for a few months.

Throughout my final year in college, I have been a research and policy intern with Human Rights for Kids. This opportunity came through a course at my school, the University of Vermont, where students are connected with various local or nationwide nonprofits to be an intern for the semester. The course is taught by Barbara Rachelson, a dedicated state legislator in Vermont, and a member of HRFK's board. Upon learning briefly about HRFK on the first day of class of the fall semester, I knew immediately that this was the organization I wanted to be matched with. As a Sociology major with a Crime and Criminal Justice concentration, I have always been passionate to learn more about the broken systems within our country and the work being done to reform them. I was very excited to be matched with HRFK and begin my internship.

As my work began, I learned so much about how children in the U.S. are being negatively impacted by the juvenile justice system. As someone already interested in justice reform work prior to this internship, I was shocked at how little I knew about the juvenile system itself. I always thought that the juvenile system was entirely separate from that of adults, but I quickly learned that the two are deeply connected. There are thousands of individuals in the U.S. who are currently serving sentences they received while they were minors. Children as young as 10 can be tried as adults in some states, and many states are yet to ban inhumane juvenile life without parole sentences. These children are often forgotten and left behind by society. This is

why the work that HRFK does is so important. They provide a voice and advocate for those who need to be heard and supported.

I have had the opportunity to do so many meaningful things during my time as an intern. Even though I was working in a remote format, I still gained so much knowledge and I was able to apply it to the courses I took this year. I used data from HRFK's 2023 [Crimes Against Humanity Report](#) to write my final research paper for my Criminal Justice course in the fall, which was about banning juvenile life without parole sentences. I also collaborated with the HRFK team to write an [op-ed about school shooting threats made by juveniles and the implications they have for free speech](#). It was published in the South Florida Sun Sentinel. I enjoyed my time during the first semester so much that I decided to retake Barbara's class and intern with HRFK again! This semester, I had the chance to go to the Vermont State House and sit in on policy meetings with Teresa Kominos, who is Policy Counsel for HRFK. One of those bills was [H.2](#), which aimed to raise the minimum age for sentencing in Vermont. It was so rewarding to see that bill get passed and signed into law. I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know HRFK's amazing team during weekly staff meetings, albeit over Google Meets. Hearing about the work they do was very inspiring and solidified for me that I want to go down a similar career path.

My biggest project during my time as an intern was assisting with ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) survey outreach to incarcerated people in Colorado, my home state. The responses I received back were more meaningful than I could have ever imagined. Many of the respondents chose to include a separate letter along with the completed survey detailing their experiences throughout their childhood and/or time spent incarcerated. There were many common themes that I noticed while reading the responses. Every single one of the 21 respondents had experienced at least one ACE, and this trauma caused them to go down a path that led to their involvement in the criminal justice system. When asked if they felt safe and supported when coming into the system, they all answered no. Nearly 80% reported not having access to crucial services like health care while incarcerated. It deeply saddened me to know that the experiences of those incarcerated in Colorado, a state that prides itself on social progressiveness, were so abysmal.

Some of the respondents chose to go into detail about their lives. It was heartbreaking to read what they had been through. Physically or sexually abusive households, lack of guidance, emotional and physical neglect. These were children who needed support, not punishment. Again and again, they showed remorse for the mistakes they made as children, mistakes for which they are still serving time. Many of them expressed their desire to get involved in juvenile justice reform upon their release, and to help stop kids from going down the same path as them. Below is a quote from a letter that really struck me, and sums up many of the thoughts of the other respondents as well.

"The people who make the laws that allowed me to be put in prison at the age I was need to see that I'm a real human being just like them! Not just an anonymous piece of paper. I plan on

going into juvenile law reform so another person/kid will never go through the things I have and continue to go through. It's not right!! Of course it's hard to do this from in here... but I know this much... I will never stop fighting for what's right!!"

A majority of individuals who were incarcerated as children have become an anonymous number, just one of the millions that make up our criminal justice system. If there is anything my time with HRFK taught me, it's that these people are not inherently evil or criminal. They were children, who had experienced severe trauma, and were failed by a system that was supposed to protect them. Children have an enormous capacity for change. The current juvenile justice system has hardly any room for support and rehabilitation instead of punishment. Individuals who have faced injustice at the hands of the criminal justice system are truly inspiring, and I think that they deserve to be heard. HRFK is doing amazing, groundbreaking work to amplify these voices. I truly believe that if we all come together and look past our differences, we have the chance to make a lasting change and right many wrongs for our children of the past and future.