

# Kids in the System

## Discussion Guide

Featuring scenes and extra footage from the non-fiction film *Kids for Cash* by Robert May, “Kids in the System” is a 16-minute video designed for practical use as an educational, outreach and organizing tool for organizations and individuals interested in juvenile justice reform.

### About “Kids in the System”

“Kids in the System” tells the stories of four young people in Luzerne County, PA who were swept into the juvenile justice system for minor infractions. Arrested, shackled and locked up, Amanda, Charlie, Hillary and Ashley describe their experiences in placement while their families painfully reflect on being misled by authorities and feeling helpless. The video also provides a glimpse into the courtroom of Judge Mark A. Ciavarella, the elected juvenile court judge once celebrated for his tough-on-crime attitude. Having sentenced thousands of kids—including the four in “Kids in the System”—to juvenile detention during his 14 years as a judge, Ciavarella was ultimately sent to prison for receiving millions of dollars from a for-profit, private juvenile detention facility. Regardless of the circumstances in Luzerne County, “Kids in the System” illustrates the life-altering and, in most cases, severely damaging consequences of incarcerating children.

“Kids in the System” was adapted from the feature-length, nonfiction film *Kids for Cash*, a riveting look behind Judge Ciavarella’s notorious scandal that profiles additional youth subjects caught up in the juvenile justice system. For more information, visit [www.KidsForCashTheMovie.com](http://www.KidsForCashTheMovie.com).

### How to Use the Video

While the judicial scandal that took place in Luzerne County is certainly not the norm, the zero tolerance policies and trauma experienced by the youth and families featured in the video are common across the United States. “Kids in the System” raises important issues about the ultimate outcomes of the juvenile justice system. With a storyline that speaks to a range of audiences—parents, youth, attorneys, court professionals, human service providers, educators and others—the video and this accompanying guide were created to prompt focused conversations about, and greater understanding of, important issues within the juvenile justice system, including right to counsel, lack of court oversight, zero tolerance policies, trauma and the lasting effects of system involvement.

Consider the work that you do and how the expert opinions and personal experiences featured in the video can enrich new dialogue that could lead to or help promote tangible actions in your work, in the community, even at the state level. The discussion questions on p. 3 are designed to help audiences connect scenes from the video to the circumstances in your community. Depending on your goals, the video and post-screening discussions can help you build dialogue and relationships with other key sectors, educate parents and youth on how to better navigate the system, and gain support for proposed reforms and programs that further the best interests and well-being of children and families.

### A Note About Demographics

Juvenile justice systems in every state detain a disproportionate percentage of youth of color compared with the general population. Data as recent as 2010 indicates that youth of color represent 68% of the nation’s detained children.<sup>1</sup> However, according to a 2012 US Census poll, Luzerne County’s population is 92.7% Caucasian,<sup>2</sup> thus “Kids in the System” provides little context for the racial disparities within the criminal justice system at large. We encourage discussion facilitators to acknowledge the demographic makeup of their juvenile justice population during post-screening discussions and to bring in speakers, stories and facts that may help to localize these issues as they exist in your community.

<sup>1</sup> Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement, 2010 [www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezacjrp/](http://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezacjrp/)

<sup>2</sup> US Census Bureau, 2012 [quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/42/42079.html](http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/42/42079.html)



Photo courtesy of SenArt Films/Kids For Cash Movie

## Tips for Facilitators

### Facilitation

Before delving into sensitive conversations, it is important to establish guidelines and create a safe space in which participants trust each other enough to share their experiences, opinions and ideas. Remind people that although their responses may be noted, their identity will not be disclosed to anyone outside the room. Also consider sharing some of the following guidelines:

- **Step Up, Step Back:** If you are a quieter person, feel empowered to share your experiences and step up. If you tend to speak a lot, step back so others have a chance to speak.
- **Throw Glitter, Not Shade:** Be positive when others share their ideas.
- **One Mic:** One person speaks at a time.
- **“I” Statements:** Speak from your own experience as much as possible and start your statements with “I think,” “I feel” or “I believe.”
- **No Wrong Answers:** Most of these questions are geared toward personal reflection and story sharing. Your experiences and your perspectives are always correct!

### Resources

Think about additional materials and handouts you would like to have on hand for your screening that will reinforce the messages you want to highlight. For example, you may want to be prepared with data on your local or state juvenile justice system to provide context and grounds for further discussion. Budget time in your agenda if you need to explain these additional resources.

### Follow-Up

What are your next steps after this screening? Be sure to clearly address any subsequent actions you would like your group to take. If attendees are not people with whom you are in regular contact, be sure to circulate a sign-in sheet so that those who would like to learn more can provide contact information.

## Discussion Questions

The following questions are designed to move your conversation from dialogue to practical action. They are categorized based on specific audiences. Feel free to pick and choose—select questions that you think will most engage your group and deepen your current efforts—and remain open to constructively accommodating audience concerns or questions that may not be covered in this guide. Indeed, these questions may also prompt you to come up with some questions of your own.

### Getting The Conversation Started: Immediately After Your Screening

- What scenes or moments are particularly memorable or powerful for you? Did any particular individuals or scenes jump out at you?
- Can you relate to any of the stories or individuals in the video?
- What parallels do you see between the juvenile justice system in the video and the juvenile justice system as you know it? What differences do you see?
- How did these kids' experiences make you feel? Do you think they benefited from their system involvement?

### Digging Deeper: Additional Prompts for Different Audiences

#### General Audiences

Parents, youth, educators, college students, community and/or faith groups

1. Before seeing this video, did you have any knowledge of the experiences of young people and families involved with the juvenile justice system? Did you learn anything new from the video? If so, what?
2. The video shows the various sectors that play a role in a young person's experience in the juvenile justice system: the school, the court (judges, defenders, prosecutors, etc.), law enforcement, parents and advocates. In your own words, describe the roles of these various players. Do you think one or more of the players should have done anything differently?
3. What do you know about the juvenile courts in your community? How are youth ending up in court and in placement? How are they treated there?
4. Are you aware of similar occurrences in your juvenile courts, that is, youth breaking minor rules or committing minor offenses and ending up before the court? What patterns or problems have you seen, if any? Can you think of better alternatives?
5. Hillary's mom signs a waiver of right to counsel, and her daughter is left without a lawyer to represent her in court. In your opinion, what are the implications of waiving the right to counsel? What would you have done if Hillary were your daughter?
6. Amanda says the court process scared her and made her feel like an adult criminal. How might this experience affect her later in life? What consequences might this have for her family? For the broader community?
7. What changes do you think need to be made to the juvenile justice system?
8. Who else do you think needs to see this video? Why?

## Practitioners

Professionals working in juvenile justice or related fields

1. Do any of the stories remind you of cases you have seen in your community? How so?
2. Is your sector (e.g., school, court, law enforcement) represented in the video? How so?
3. Are there any lessons you can take from the video and apply to your own work?
4. In your opinion, what does the video reveal about the issues in the juvenile justice system? Are you attempting to address those challenges in your work? In what way?
5. Keeping those issues and challenges in mind, what is the role of schools? Social service providers? Parents? System professionals such as prosecutors, defense counsel, guardians ad litem, probation/court services, law enforcement, judges?
6. Does your community provide any mechanism to evaluate the long-term effects of system involvement and outcomes for children? Does feedback from affected families inform any aspects of your local juvenile justice system?
7. Do you find the way the film portrays the damage to these families' and youths' lives to be accurate and meaningful? Why?
8. Who else do you think needs to see this video? Why?
9. How do you believe the general public will respond to this video? What additional context, if any, do they need in order to understand how these issues can affect them directly?
10. Are you aware of a better way to manage youth with behavioral problems? Describe.
11. Do evidence-based programs exist in your community to help positively intervene in the lives of at-risk youth and their families? Are any effective? How do you know?
12. Do you feel that the children in the video were helped or harmed by their experiences?



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Active Voice tackles social issues through the creative use of film. We believe that real progress requires real connection and that film has a unique power to bring people together in meaningful ways. Every day, Active Voice helps filmmakers, funders and communities start the conversations and relationships that lead to lasting, measurable change. Since our inception in 2001, Active Voice has influenced local, regional and national dialogue on issues including immigration, criminal justice, health care and education.  
[www.activevoice.net](http://www.activevoice.net)



SenArt Films was created in 2000 with the mission to create commercially viable films that aspire to the highest level of storytelling and execution, passionately engaging an audience. SenArt focuses on character-driven projects that have the potential to meld socially-conscious issues with entertainment, creating broad discussion. SenArt has produced the Oscar® winning film *The Fog of War* along with other award-winning films such as *The Station Agent*, *Stevie*, *Bonneville* and *The War Tapes*.  
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