

TESTIMONY OF JIM ST. GERMAIN
BEFORE THE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CRIME, TERRORISM, HOMELAND
SECURITY, AND INVESTIGATIONS
ON JUVENILE JUSTICE REFORM IN THE MODERN ERA
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My name is Jim St. Germain, and I was born into abject poverty in Haiti. My family moved to New York City when I was the tender age of ten, in search of a better life. Prior to our arrival in the U.S., my father struggled greatly to provide the basics for our family. He battled drug and alcohol addiction, and was chronically unemployed. Uncertainty was the only thing that was certain in our lives. My siblings and I grew up without access to running water, electricity, health care, and sometimes even food.

When I came to New York, we moved into an overcrowded apartment that housed fourteen members of my family. As a child, I had envisioned life in America mirroring Kevin's life from the movie, "Home Alone," which I'd watched many times. In this life, I imagined that my only trouble would be keeping strangers out of my well-manicured suburban home, with friendly neighbors holding welcome signs upon my arrival.

Unfortunately, the reality I encountered in America was a stark contrast to the one I had seen in the movies. It was filled with poverty, hunger, violence, homelessness, broken schools and homes, negative peer pressure, and drugs -- an unforgiving environment filled with hopelessness.

Numerous studies have shown that children and adolescents and their developing brains don't respond well to such traumatic environments. That was certainly the case with me. The older guys in the streets were, I now know, bad role models, but at the time I was young and foolish so before long I began to skip school, fight, steal, deal drugs, and engage in other mischievous and even illegal acts.

Things spiraled downward to the point that, just before my 16th birthday, I had multiple encounters with the law, mostly related to dealing drugs. It wasn't because I had some innate predisposition to crime, but rather reflected the reality of my life -- lack of adult supervision, few good role models, terrible schools, a scarcity of services and resources to help me get on a positive path, and an economically depressed community. As a result of this environment and my own bad choices, the walls of the justice system were closing around me and I felt trapped. I knew my life was miserable and would likely end in death or long-term incarceration, and certainly wanted to avoid either of these fates, but I didn't know how to escape.

But I got very, very lucky. I didn't know it at the time, but until very recently, New York treated 16-and-17 year-olds as adults in the criminal justice system, regardless of the infraction or crime. By pure chance, I was arrested just before my 16th birthday, so my case was adjudicated in the juvenile system rather than my being treated as a hardened adult criminal.

This made all the difference. For impoverished young black men like me, if we get caught up in the criminal justice system, it pretty much locks us up and throws away the key. I'm sure you're familiar with the horrifying statistics -- and I would have been another one, except that, by dint of my age, instead of prison, I was placed at "Boys Town," a non-secured detention facility designed for rehabilitation. I was surrounded there by mentors and positive male authority figures who provided an environment of structure and accountability rather than intimidation and

punishment, broke me of my bad habits and negative attitudes, and taught me right from wrong. I also received mental health care, education, adequate medical services, vocational training, recreational activities, family involvement, and more. It was a difficult process, both for them and me, and it took three full years, but eventually I was able to grow and mature and turn myself around.

I shudder to think what would have happened had I been arrested after I'd turned 16. Instead of Boys Town, I would have almost certainly faced the violence and trauma of solitary confinement in an adult facility such as Rikers Island -- truly a place that is hell on earth. Consider the infamous case of Kalief Browder, who at the age of 16 was charged -- falsely it turns out -- with punching a man and stealing his backpack. Because he refused to take a plea deal, yet couldn't afford a mere \$3,000 in bail, he languished at Rikers Island for *three years* awaiting trial, two of them in solitary confinement, isolated for 23 hours/day. While there, he was starved and beaten multiple times by both guards and other inmates.

Eventually prosecutors dropped all charges and released Kalief, but by then he had missed his junior and senior years of high school, as well as his graduation and senior prom. In fact, he wasn't even a teenager anymore: he turned 20 four days before he was released. He was a broken man, with no high school diploma, no job, no money and no apartment of his own. He wasn't provided with supportive services or any kind of reentry plan. Multiple times a day, he had flashbacks to the horrors he'd seen and experienced at Rikers. He suffered from terrible depression and, after multiple attempts, finally succeeded in killing himself in June 2015.

Though he was never convicted of a crime, Kalief, both during his time in the criminal justice system and afterward, was denied access to the types of services that had saved me -- all because of the random fact that he had been arrested a few months after, rather than before, his 16th birthday.

Because of this, my story has a happier ending.

While at Boys Town, I enrolled in a GED program that also provided counseling, and despite starting far below grade level, I graduated high school on time. Then I enrolled at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, where I earned an associate degree in human services, and then continued my college education at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, where I graduated magna cum laude with a bachelor's degree in political science. I am now planning to apply to a master's program at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

I have now dedicated my life to helping other youth escape the same trap I was caught up in. I co-founded and run Preparing Leaders of Tomorrow, a non-profit mentoring organization for at-risk youth between the ages of nine and twenty-one living in Brooklyn. I also work as a residential care advocate with youth caught up in the justice system and their families throughout the New York region and beyond. Additionally, I have worked as a youth advocate for kids living with mental illness at the Mental Health Association, Inc., and have served as a member of

New York State's Division of Criminal Justice Services Youth Advisory Council. Additionally, I have worked with countless local, state, and federal officials advising them on matters related to juvenile justice, mentoring, mental health, substance abuse, and access to education.

Some of the leaders and officials I have worked with include former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg; a former member of this committee, Congressman Bobby Scott of Virginia; and Senator Chris Murphy from Connecticut. I also serve as a Board member with the National Juvenile Defender's Center, an organization based in Washington DC, and last year I was appointed by President Obama to serve on the Department of Justice's Coordinating Council on Juvenile and Justice Delinquency Prevention.

The many obstacles I have encountered in life and the assistance I received in overcoming them fuel my passion for public service and sense of personal responsibility to my community. In my quest to relay this passion and journey, I have authored a memoir, [A Stone of Hope](#), which will be published by Harper Collins in two weeks. Lastly and most importantly, I'm a dedicated father to my 4 year-old son, Caleb.

This country made a big investment in me and I'd like to think that it has paid off.

If I can leave you with one thought, it's the importance of intervening and providing the important services that saved my life -- services that any member of this committee would fight to secure for their loved ones -- *before* a young person has turned to a life of crime and gets caught up in the criminal justice system.. Unfortunately, this rarely happens.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my testimony, and I look forward to working with the Committee to improve and reform our nation's criminal and juvenile justice systems.