

Youth Voice in Juvenile Justice Research

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Project Overview

The purpose of this project was to learn from young people aged 18 to 24 years old who have lived experience with the juvenile justice system. Young people were interviewed about their perspectives on how to improve the system, which topics should receive attention in future research, and how best to engage young people and others with lived experience in that work. WestEd also conducted interviews with practitioners who work with young people affected by the juvenile justice system. Given the trauma that many young people face in their interactions with the juvenile justice system, this project did not ask young people to talk about their personal experiences, although some did voluntarily share individual stories. Some of the young people interviewed also offered insights from their experiences in both the juvenile justice and foster care systems.

About This Summary

This document is a summary of reflections shared by 30 people who participated in interviews with researchers at the WestEd Justice & Prevention Research Center (JPRC). Interviews were conducted in two rounds:

- ▶ Round 1, October through December 2020, 10 young people and 11 practitioners
- ▶ Round 2, May through August 2021, 9 young people

The second round of interviews was conducted to hear from Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino/a, and Indigenous or Native young people, who are disproportionately represented in state and local juvenile justice systems but were underrepresented in the first round of interviews for this project.

This document is a summary and does not capture everything that was shared during the interviews.¹ Because each person's experience with the juvenile justice system is different, the information shared here reflects only the experiences of the individuals who participated in interviews and does not represent the experiences of all young people impacted by the system. The summary includes the following sections:

- ▶ a description of the participants
- ▶ an overview of participant perspectives on the juvenile justice system
- ▶ areas of the juvenile justice system that participants suggested as topics for future research
- ▶ participants' recommendations for how researchers can create positive, meaningful opportunities for young people to participate and partner in such research

The information in this summary provides valuable insights from participants about the juvenile justice system and how research can help improve the system for young people. JPRC will share and use this information to guide future research and evaluation work.

Who Are the Participants?

Nineteen of the people who participated in interviews are young adults who have lived experience with the juvenile justice system. At the time of the interviews, these interviewees ranged in age from 17 to 33 and lived in nine states. Seven are female and 12 are male, one of whom identifies as FTM (female-to-male) transgender.

An open-ended question was used to collect information about each participant's racial and ethnic identity. Six participants identify as Hispanic or Latino/a, one as Mexican, two as Black or African American, five as White or Caucasian, one as White and Filipino, two as White or Caucasian and Hispanic, one as White and Indian American, and one did not provide their race or ethnicity.²

1 WestEd asked for feedback from the young people and practitioners who participated in this project to ensure that this summary accurately represents the perspectives they shared with us.

2 The language used in this brief to describe the racial, ethnic, and gender identities of the interview participants is the language that the participants used to describe themselves.

The 11 practitioners who participated in interviews are professionals who work in the juvenile justice system or with young people in other settings. These practitioners live in seven states and have each worked with young people impacted by the justice system for an average of 12 years. Six identify as female, and five identify as male. In terms of race and ethnicity, six identify as Black or African American, three as Hispanic or Latino/a, and two as White or Caucasian.

Participant Perspectives on the Juvenile Justice System

Themes from interviews with young adults

Young people were asked what they thought of the juvenile justice system, what could be changed, what could be done better to help young people be successful, and what the greatest challenges are for young people who interact with the system. Here are the main themes that came out of the interviews, with examples of what participants said.

Young people are experts on the juvenile justice system, but their experiences, feelings, and perspectives are not often heard or respected.

- ▶ The people who have been most affected by the system are those who know it best. The system's creators and current staff might think the system is working, but they have not experienced it from the inside.
- ▶ Young people deserve to be treated with empathy and respect, but the system treats them like criminals. Sometimes young people make mistakes, but they are still young and can grow.
- ▶ Young people in the system can feel like they do not have control over their own lives. Many young people who have been involved with the system want to use their voices to change the system so that others do not go through the same things they did.

The impacts of interaction with the juvenile justice system are large and long-lasting.

- ▶ The way the system is designed can make it difficult for young people to get out of it once they are in it. This is especially true for young people who do not have access to financial or family and adult support.
- ▶ Young people are labeled once they are in the system, but the root causes of their involvement with the system are often not understood, asked about, or considered.
- ▶ After exiting the system, young people often must navigate barriers to employment, education, housing, voting, career pathways, and mental health treatment or counseling. Interactions with the juvenile justice system can be traumatic and stigmatizing for young people, with effects that extend well beyond release from probation or confinement.

Young people benefit from education, counseling, and support.

- ▶ Education, counseling, legal support, mentorship, and support navigating daily life as an adult can help young people be successful. However, these resources are not available to everyone equally.
- ▶ Young people often end up in the system because they have experienced trauma and are doing the best they can to cope with difficult situations and experiences. They need support, not punishment. One suggestion we heard for improving the system and its treatment of young people is to hire staff who have lived experience in the juvenile justice system themselves. Interviewees also talked about the importance of training staff to understand the effects of trauma on young people.
- ▶ Young people are resilient. The right kind of support can help them heal and rebuild their lives after being involved with the system.

Themes from interviews with practitioners

Practitioners who work with young people were asked what they thought of the juvenile justice system, what improvements should be made, and what barriers young people encounter as a result of their involvement in the system. Here are the main themes that came out of the interviews, with examples of what participants said.

Young people are experts on the juvenile justice system and should have input into how to improve it and into the decisions that impact their lives.

- ▶ It is not always obvious what is wrong with systems or policies when looking at them from the outside. Young people know what they need and how the system needs to improve.
- ▶ Young people want to have control over their own lives.
- ▶ The system often treats young people like perpetrators when instead they should be recognized as people coping with difficult situations. Young people must be given power and control over their own narratives.

Young people benefit from tailored supports and the space to grow and learn.

- ▶ Young people deserve the space to fail. Everyone makes mistakes, and young people have to be allowed to make mistakes. However, in our society, when young people make mistakes and they lack key resources and supports, they end up in the juvenile justice system.
- ▶ Young people's brains are not fully developed, and they should not be punished as adults are. The system should give young people hope that things can get better. Instead, the system gives up on young people too soon.
- ▶ There is no one-size-fits-all model for services and supports. Young people need services and supports that are individualized and responsive to their needs, experiences, backgrounds, and cultures.

Young people encounter racism and inequities throughout the juvenile justice system.

- ▶ Racism has shaped the system to focus on punishment over rehabilitation.
- ▶ Racial and economic inequities drive how young people experience the system.

- ▶ Young people of color who become involved in the system do not see enough people like them in positions of authority within the system. It is important for young people to be able to see and build relationships with people who look like them and who share their backgrounds and cultures.
- ▶ The education and justice systems work together to criminalize children when instead they should be supporting children and their families. There is a school-to-prison pathway that disproportionately affects children who are Black, Hispanic, and Native American; children who are LGBTQ+; and children with physical, cognitive, and behavioral disabilities.

There needs to be more investment in families, schools, and community-based services.

- ▶ The system was not designed for parole officers and probation officers to fill as many different roles as they do for young people, including acting as law enforcers, mental health providers, and substance use treatment providers. But this is often what happens. The system often lacks the resources, supports, or education to make sure all of these jobs are done well.
- ▶ The education and justice systems need to recognize and respect the importance of families in preventing interactions with the juvenile justice system and in helping young people be successful after they have been involved with the system.
- ▶ The system should not be the source of all services for young people. School- and community-based services can help prevent interactions between young people and the system. These services can also play important roles in supporting young people and their families through interactions with the system.
- ▶ Young people come out of detention and are often sent back into the environments that pushed them into the system in the first place. For example, they may experience pressure to rejoin gangs, lack necessary financial and other resources, and have limited family support. Youth-serving systems, programs, and communities need to address how young people are affected by the environments in which they live, and additional supports need to be made available for young people to be successful.

Topics for Future Research in Juvenile Justice

WestEd asked both young people and practitioners to identify topics for future research with the goal of improving the juvenile justice system. Here are examples of what they shared.

Document the depth and diversity of young people's stories

- ▶ Document the life histories of young people, including the contexts and environments they grew up in before they became involved with the juvenile justice system.
- ▶ Examine how young people affected by the juvenile justice system may have also interacted with other systems that serve children and families, such as foster care.

Study how young people are affected by the juvenile justice system.

- ▶ Document the treatment of young people at all points in the juvenile justice system, especially while in detention. Suggestions we heard included documenting the food that young people are served in detention, the services they have access to, whether they are treated with empathy, the length of their sentences, and the use of solitary confinement while they are detained. Tell these stories—and the stories of young people in foster care—so that others can learn from them.
- ▶ Study the impact that staff members' own life experiences have on young people. Does employing staff with their own lived experiences in the justice system result in improved outcomes for young people?
- ▶ Explore the impacts of interactions with the system on young people, families, and communities.

Evaluate how supports can help young people impacted by the juvenile justice system to heal and achieve stability.

- ▶ Assess the effects of support systems and mentorship on recidivism.
- ▶ Evaluate individualized and culturally responsive services.
- ▶ Explore how restorative and trauma-informed approaches improve outcomes for young people.
- ▶ Learn how services and supports for young people can also engage families and communities.

Document how the juvenile justice system creates and perpetuates inequities.

- ▶ Identify and make public the inequities in the system, including the disparities in services and treatment that young people encounter at all points in the system. Be explicit about the historical and systemic drivers of these inequities, including racism, anti-LGBTQ+ bias, and poverty.
- ▶ Evaluate the impact of strategies to reduce inequities.
- ▶ Examine the demographics and lived experiences of staff compared with those of young people in the system.

Look to young people to guide juvenile justice system reforms.

- ▶ Continue to ask young people for their perspectives on what works and does not work and on how the system can be improved.
- ▶ Document young people's work to change the system.

Recommendations for Involving Young People in Research About the Juvenile Justice System

It is important to engage young people with lived experience in the juvenile justice system as partners and leaders in juvenile justice research. We asked young people and practitioners for their thoughts on how researchers can collaborate authentically with young people throughout the research process. Here are their recommendations about partnering effectively on future studies.

- ✓ Do research that is relatable, meaningful, and accessible to young people.
- ✓ Be authentic and transparent about the research that will be done and about how the information collected will be used to help young people and communities.
- ✓ Engage in ways that are comfortable, accessible, and convenient for young people and that maximize reach and ensure accurate data by respecting their communication and language preferences. For example, connect with young people through social media and online video platforms.
- ✓ Use a trauma-informed approach when collecting data. Be sensitive to young people's experiences, and consider these experiences in the design of the study, the questions asked, and how the information will be used.

- ✓ Relationships and trust are essential. Cold calls are not likely to be effective. Before reaching out to young people to solicit their involvement in research, connect first with adults and peer leaders who young people trust.
- ✓ When analyzing and reporting data, balance a focus on trends with an understanding of the unique experiences of individuals within the system.
- ✓ Be open-minded and nonjudgmental about young people's experiences.
- ✓ Use language that is accessible and strengths-based, focusing on positive aspects of people and groups.
- ✓ Compensate young people for their time, including, but not limited to, time spent participating in data collection (whether as partners or participants), reviewing or interpreting results, or consulting on the research process.

Conclusion

As we reflect on how this work can improve the juvenile justice system, we know this is only the beginning. Research alone cannot create systems change, but it can build pathways for new voices to join public conversations about issues that matter to all of us. We are committed to listening to and raising up the voices of people with lived experience in the systems we study. Moving ahead, we look forward to applying the insights and recommendations from this project to our future collaborations with young people.

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