

Centering Youth Voice in Juvenile Justice Reform:

A Brief Summary Report of Youth Experiences

It is well known that during adolescence, the frontal cortex – the part of the brain that controls reasoning, weighs consequences, and helps youth consider the implications of their behavior – is still developing. This ongoing brain development means that adolescents make decisions and solve problems differently than adults. Adolescents are more likely to be impulsive, misread social and emotional situations, get into accidents and fights, and engage in risk-taking behaviors. With guidance and support from parents and other caring adults, most adolescents will grow out of these behaviors as their brain develops.^{1,2,3} **Unfortunately, many adolescents are not afforded the opportunity to grow out of their neurodevelopmentally-typical behaviors without encountering the juvenile justice system.**

The juvenile justice system is responsible for ensuring community safety by promoting positive youth development and recognizing that the needs of children and adolescents in the justice system are different than those of adults.⁴ Without the recognition that children and youth have unique needs and will understand and respond differently than adults, we miss a huge opportunity to rehabilitate and promote the future well-being of our youth and communities.

Juvenile justice systems have a range of options for monitoring and rehabilitating youth, including restorative justice programs, evidence-based treatment programs, probation, and incarceration. **Alternatives to incarceration have been shown to be more effective in preventing recidivism, more cost effective, and are often the more appropriate response to adolescent behavior that is often criminalized.** The most successful programs involve family in treatment and promote healthy development at the individual, family, school, and peer levels.^{5,6,7}



Executive Summary

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) works to reduce the inappropriate and unnecessary use of secure detention, reduce racial and ethnic disparities, and improve public safety. JDAI promotes the vision that youth involved in the juvenile justice system are best served using proven, family-focused interventions and creating opportunities for positive youth development. In 2009, Rhode Island juvenile justice stakeholders joined in partnership with the Annie E. Casey Foundation to become a statewide JDAI site which is coordinated by Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. Since then, JDAI in Rhode Island has focused on reducing the unnecessary and inappropriate use of secure confinement, enhancing community-based alternatives to detention, and reducing racial and ethnic disparities.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is committed to amplifying youth voice so youth can lead on policies that directly impact their lives and futures. With this commitment in mind, in December 2021, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT planned and conducted two focus groups with youth who had come in contact with the juvenile justice system. Our objectives were to learn about their experiences, hear how youth think the juvenile justice system can be improved, and what services, supports, or system changes could have prevented them from entering this system in the first place. **The overarching goal was to raise up youth voice in Rhode Island so it is central to policy decision making and juvenile justice reform efforts.**



Focus Group Overview

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT planned and conducted focus groups with support from the **JDAI Steering Committee**. The committee provided input on the questions asked during the focus groups, recruitment strategy, timing, and format of the focus groups. **Tides Family Services** helped us identify a sample of youth who had contact with the juvenile justice system and had received services from Tides. Tides is a non-profit organization that provides community-based juvenile justice, child welfare, and behavioral health services to children and families throughout Rhode Island. They serve approximately 500 youth ages six to 21 and provide in-home services to youth and their families, with the goal of family preservation and preventing youth from needing residential placements.^{8,9}

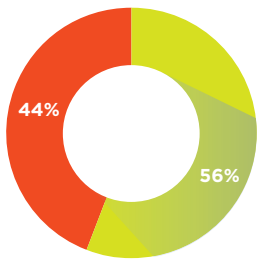
Youth were asked questions about:

- Their experiences interacting with the police and if they had ever been arrested
- Their experiences with the Rhode Island Family Court or juvenile hearing boards
- Their experiences at the Rhode Island Training School, on probation, and in community placements
- How they think their race or ethnicity affected their experience with the juvenile justice system
- What could have prevented them from entering the juvenile justice system

All focus groups were recorded and transcribed. After reviewing the transcripts, we identified key themes and highlighted quotes from youth that best illustrated these themes. **We hope that these findings help inform juvenile justice reform efforts and ensure that youth voice is at the center of decision making.**

Characteristics of Youth Participants

A total of nine youth participated in the focus groups. These youth may not be representative of all youth who have come in contact with Rhode Island’s juvenile justice system, but we hope that their perceptions, experiences, and reflections help inform the system.

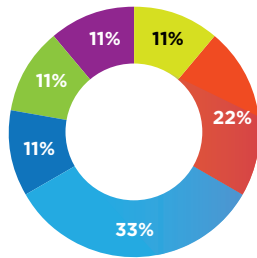


N=9 youth

Gender of Participating Youth

- Girls 56% (5)
- Boys 44% (4)

■ We held two focus groups, one that included four boys and another that included five girls. No youth identified as transgender or non-binary. The boys’ focus group was led by a male facilitator and the girls’ by a female facilitator.

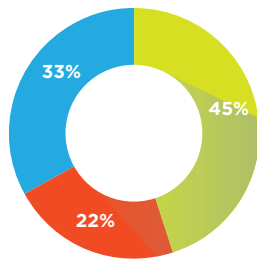


N=9 youth

Ages of Participating Youth

- 14 11% (1)
- 15 22% (2)
- 16 33% (3)
- 17 11% (1)
- 18 0% (0)
- 19 11% (1)
- 20 0% (0)
- 21 11% (1)

■ We had a total of nine participants across both groups, and they ranged in age from 14 to 21 but the majority were 15 or 16 years old.



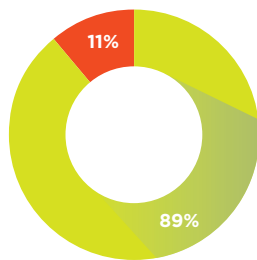
N=9 youth

Race/Ethnicity of Participating Youth

- Black 45% (4)
- Hispanic or Latino 22% (2)
- Two or More Races 33% (3)
- White 0% (0)

*Youth self-identified their race and ethnicity. Those who selected more than one response were categorized as having “Two or More Races”.

■ Forty-five percent of our sample identified as Black or African American; 33% identified as having two or more races; and 22% identified as Hispanic or Latino. There were no participants who identified their race as white.

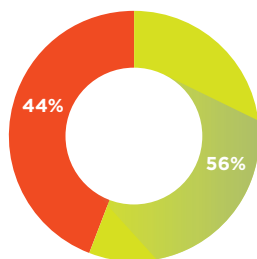


N=9 youth

City/Town of Participating Youth

- Providence 89% (8)
- Pawtucket 11% (1)

■ Eight of our participants were from Providence and one was from Pawtucket.



N=9 youth

Have Spent Time at the Rhode Island Training School

- Yes 56% (5)
- No 44% (4)

■ Of the nine participants, 56% had spent time at the Rhode Island Training School. When asked “How many times have you been arrested?” and “How many times were you in court?” some youth said, “Zero times” and others said, “So many times that I can’t give you a number.”

Policing

Many youth had early experiences with the police, some as early as elementary school. **Some experiences were positive ones**, like seeing a police officer in school to teach about “stranger danger,” and some expressed feelings of progress with the police.

“There’s a lot that changed, ‘cause not every cop’s a bad cop. You feel me? Not every cop’s straight ahead doing dumb stuff.”

However, **some early memories youth had of police interaction involved violence and maltreatment.**

“Like once you do something, ... it doesn’t matter if you’re a kid...you’re a criminal. In all honesty, they don’t even know what really happened...First time I ever got arrested was terrible. Punched in the back of my head and all that.”

“My first time being locked up, I got beat up by a cop...”

“I was...in elementary school... it was like they sort of treated me as a grown man.”

Many youth expressed that they feel nervous, uncomfortable, or that they act differently around police. **Even if they know they have done nothing wrong to prompt a police intervention, the anxiety of police presence weighed heavily on them.**

“We feel threatened by cops.”

“I’m like you’re trying to do something to me, so I’m... [running].”

“I have two phones that I keep with me at all times whenever I get pulled over. I have one I got on live and the other one I tuck it in the cup holder and I have it recorded up.”

“[[I’m] nervous. Always nervous.”



We asked the youth if they could tell the police one thing that would help them understand young people, what would it be? **The overwhelming response was that police need to have a better understanding of how young people are different from adults and that their interactions should be approached differently.**

“People under the age of 18 think more emotionally than practically.”

“So, it is better to understand what the kid felt, like in the moment, and you have to understand that that’s what they were acting off of. It wasn’t intentional, it’s just how they felt in that moment.”

“...take it easy on minors...”

“Cops need to stop putting their hands on their gun.”

“Why you got to be so aggressive to us. It’s like, why you gotta feel like you’re better than us...”

“...the way you approach things is the response you’re gonna get.”

We were also interested in how youth felt about having police in their school. All of their high schools had school resource officers (SROs), and some had police in cruisers stationed outside their school as well. **The youth shared that if there needed to be police at the schools, then they needed to actually provide protection.**

“They did nothing.”

“Sometimes the cops don’t care, they just look...”

“You heard a gunshot... homeboy was all the way down the street. How did it take you that long to get to him? He was right there!”

“I don’t think they’re ready for their work.”



Family Court

Youth expressed that their experience with the Family Court did not feel “right-sized” for them. **Overall, they felt intimidated, did not understand the process, and felt they did not have a voice in their own cases.**

“I think each judge needs to understand that they are talking to a kid...this kid doesn't know you, so they are uncomfortable. And sometimes kids tend not to respond to certain questions... 'cause it's uncomfortable for them. They don't know you and then they're being watched by other people too. So, it puts you in a place where you don't really feel like answering.”

“It's usually your lawyer that talks...you can't really talk to the judge...because I am the person that did it, I would like to talk to them personally because they're the ones charging me with it. Maybe like a separate room you talk to the judge.”

“So it's your lawyer who just [says], 'You have to just sit here, say yes to everything, plead guilty.' Even if you didn't do it... You have to plead guilty, you have to do whatever 'cause if you go to trial and they try to make up something and they find out that you did it, you're going to the Training School.”

“They need to like dumb it, dumb it, dumb it down you know. 'Cause the big words they be using in there I just be like...I just go with what my lawyer tells me to say. Like they don't really explain as much. ...'cause I just be sitting there like, 'okay.'”

When asked if there was **one thing they would like to tell the Court** about what it's like to be a young person in their courtroom, one youth said,

“...I still have time to learn. You feel me, so don't make it seem like this is really who I am. 'Cause I still have space to grow. That's really it.”

Rhode Island Family Court Diversion

■ Juvenile courts have a wide range of options for handling juvenile offenders, including restitution, community service, revocation of driving privileges, counseling, substance abuse treatment, and probation.¹⁰ **In 2022 in Rhode Island, more than half (51%) of all cases referred to the Family Court Juvenile Services intake department were diverted** instead of proceeding to a formal court hearing, which prevented many youth and families from unnecessarily progressing further into the system.¹¹

Juvenile Hearing Boards

We asked the youth if any of them had participated in a juvenile hearing board (JHB) and how that experience differed from the formal court experience. **None of the youth in either focus group had been offered the opportunity to participate in a JHB --** and in fact none had even heard of JHBs.

It is important to note that the Providence JHBs were not fully active in 2021 after temporarily shutting down during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Juvenile Hearing Boards and Restorative Justice

- A community-based option that diverts youth from court involvement is the Juvenile Hearing Board (JHB). Comprised of volunteer community members, the JHBs permit the diversion of youth accused of lower-level offenses, including status offenses and misdemeanors. Youth who complete sanctions, such as community service, restitution, and counseling, are often able to avoid having a court record following this process. **Rhode Island's 36 Juvenile Hearing Boards reported hearing 362 cases in 2022.**^{12,13}
- The foundational principle of the JHB is rooted in restorative justice. Restorative justice practices offer a meaningful way to engage the youth offender, victim, and community in conversation and action to restore a balance to the community.¹⁴ These practices are well aligned with the ways in which young people learn from their mistakes. Restorative justice provides an opportunity for the youth who committed the offense to take responsibility for their actions, understand the harm their actions may have caused, and empathize with the victim while making amends for their actions and repairing the community dynamic.¹⁵ The open dialogue afforded by restorative justice opportunities gets at the root cause of a youth's actions by centering their voice in the narrative. This helps determine the type of support they need moving forward to mature into a responsible adult.

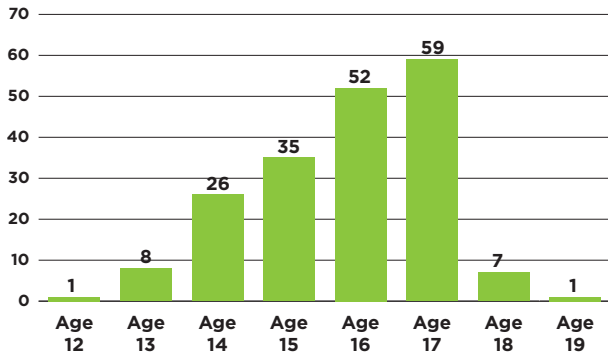
The Rhode Island Training School

Youth felt that being detained in a secure facility forced them to grow up quickly.

“[The first time I went to the Training School]...I turned 9 right there in the Training School...it's like I grew up too fast.”

“I had probation since 15...I was never free...my whole teenage life.”

Youth at the Training School by Age, Calendar Year 2022



Source: Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families, RIC HIST, 2022. Total number of youth at the Training School by age (189) is larger than the total number of youth at the Training School (180) due to some youth having birthdays while at the Training School and therefore being counted twice.

Youth also expressed that secure detention is not the right setting for some kids. On a case-by-case basis, when other safe placement options may not be available for youth, they may be temporarily held at the Rhode Island Training School if their situation requires a secure facility..

“...when I went to the Training School there was a lot of kids that had problems with their parents. I don't think if you're running away from your home you should get put in a Training School...Like they didn't even do [a] crime, they're in jail now. 'Cause they ran away from home. 'Cause something's happening at home...and that's just crazy.”

Rhode Island Training School Progress

■ Rhode Island has made progress in reducing the number of youth held at the Training School. Between 2008 and 2022, the annual total number of youth at the Training School at any point during the year declined by 83% from 1,084 to 180. The steady decline of youth at the Training School began after the Rhode Island General Assembly passed legislation that established a cap of 148 boys and 12 girls on any given day at the Training School in July 2008.^{16,17}

Many youth felt that confinement impacted their mental health. Even though they liked the staff, activities, and felt safe at the Rhode Island Training School, at the end of the day they knew they would be locked in their room and expressed that it took a toll on their mental health and well-being.

“When I went in there, I wasn't even 18... but it did change me. That's why I changed, because I was by myself a lot like I couldn't be around nobody no more...I was just... in my room, depressed, by myself, just like, damn. Then I started being anti-social...”

“They say it themselves, like kids is not supposed to be in their room for that long 'cause then they start losing their mind going crazy.”

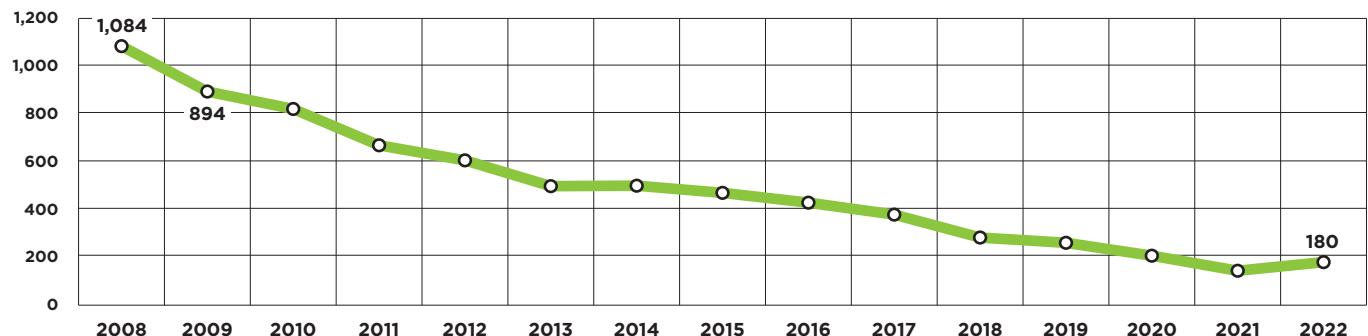
“The Training School's turning into a mental place.”

“A lot of kids, like, reach their breaking point in there.”

“I basically feel dead inside when I'm over there, 'cause I'm away from my mom, and like, people.”

“Even though you are safe over there, it's a safe place, but I have ADHD and stuff, and I can't sit in a room. It's just a room with a bed, and a desk, and the doors are locked...you can't even walk when you have to... you're stuck in there..”

Youth in the Juvenile Justice System, Calendar Years 2008-2022



Source: Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families, RIC HIST, 2008-2022.

Prevention

Youth felt that the lack of structured and enriching activities available in the community drew them to the types of activities that got them into trouble. **They want their time to be occupied, and they want to take part in recreational out-of-school time activities, but they run into barriers for participation (both access-related and financial for programming, sports, and clubs).**

“You’ve gotta keep kids occupied...if I was occupied in something then I wouldn’t have did it...if I had something to do.”

“Like if you’re in the Training School, some people come home, and there’s nothing out here for them.”

“[I would be interested in] like an all-girls program. Where we could all talk about our situations and stuff.”

“...The reason why kids are getting into trouble right now, because they don’t have...well everything runs on money... you have to pay for the YMCA, Boys & Girls Club...we don’t have money...we don’t have a job...all we can do is get into trouble.”

Mental Health and the Juvenile Justice System

Youth with mental health needs that go unaddressed are often funneled into the juvenile justice system due to historic criminalization of behaviors associated with mental health needs, and the justice system they interact with is not always designed to meet those needs.^{18,19} Approximately 65-70% of youth arrested annually in the United States have a diagnosable mental health disorder.²⁰ Some youth may be incarcerated due to an unmet mental health need that resulted in a behavior that was criminalized, and many more develop mental health issues due to incarceration.²¹ Since 2006, the **Rhode Island Family Court has integrated the Mental Health Clinic (MHC) into the Family Court to better meet the needs of court-involved youth** who are not incarcerated. The MHC provides a variety of evidence-based forensic assessments and consultation to judges and magistrates for court-involved youth ages eight to 18 who are involved with juvenile justice or child welfare petitions. Each year, more than 150 youth receive in-house forensic, mental health and/or substance use assessments, consultation, and/or service referrals through the MHC.²²



Youth expressed the desire and need for workforce training opportunities and employment, and made the connection that having the opportunity to work for the things they need and want provides a building block for successful futures.

“I wish my school offered programs for what kids want to do with their future. Like I wanna be a CNA... they don’t have that.”

“I just feel like we need more jobs for 15-year-olds and stuff. Because you’re legally allowed to start working at 14, but nobody hires you at 14.”

“If you’re putting people in a position to get their life on track before it [messes] up...I’m saying they don’t have to worry about, ‘well I have to find another way to get money.’ Selling drugs wouldn’t happen. You feel me, like the robbing wouldn’t happen, like if you set people up for them to be able to live instead of just being alive, that would change a lot.”

Youth want more adult role models. They appreciated seeing people who looked like them and came from their neighborhoods in positions at the Rhode Island Training School and as social workers and caseworkers at programs like Tides Family Services. It was empowering for them.

“I really liked her...she was the real deal...she was like ‘I’m doing this ’cause I see who you guys come from... because I came from here too.’”

“..when I was [at the Training School]..it was just good staff, you feel me? Like everybody knew everybody .. everybody grew up in the same scenario.. Like all the staff in there knows like what we’re going through.”

Racism

When given the opportunity to reflect on how/if they believed their race or ethnicity impacted their juvenile justice system involvement, **youth described experiencing racism in encounters with police and the system.**

“I feel like being Black... to them that’s a felony arrest. That’s like the biggest problem.”

“...I’m expecting [the Officer of Color] to be more understanding, and look more into my point of view...

he told me that the reason why kids of color are being arrested so much is because of children like myself, without even listening to what I had to say.”

“It’d be Black cops, the Spanish cops... but the white cops? They’ll do you worse. There’s a different level to it the way they do it ‘cause like the other cops...they don’t have the hatred.”

“There’ll always be someone to replace the hatred.”

Racial and Ethnic Disparities in the Juvenile Justice System

Despite drastic decreases in the number of youth involved in juvenile justice locally and nationally, Youth of Color continue to be disproportionately represented at every stage of the juvenile justice system. Nationally, Black youth are five times as likely to be incarcerated as their white peers.²³

During 2022 in Rhode Island, Black youth were 11 times more likely to be at the Rhode Island Training School compared to white youth and were four times more likely than youth of all races. American Indian/Alaska Native youth were 10 times more likely, and Hispanic youth were seven times more likely to be at the Training School than white youth.²⁴

It is well documented that objective admissions screening tools help limit the use of secure detention to serious offenders and reduce bias in decision making for which youth are sent to secure detention. The Rhode Island General Assembly passed a law in 2008 that mandates the use of a screening tool called the Risk Assessment Instrument (RAI) for

youth being considered for secure detention. The RAI has been piloted but has not yet been fully implemented in Rhode Island and needs reevaluation before widespread use in the field.^{25,26,27}

Even in opportunities to divert youth from the juvenile justice system we see prominent disparities. Nationally, Youth of Color, and specifically Black youth, are significantly less likely to be offered diversion program opportunities compared to their white peers. System diversion is a front-end opportunity to provide more appropriate responses to adolescent behavior. A growing body of research suggests that among youth with less serious offenses, those who experience arrest, formal court involvement, and incarceration also have a greater likelihood of subsequent criminal behavior and recidivism compared to those who do not encounter the formal system.^{28,29,30} When racial and ethnic disparities are present at the very first step of system entry, the disparate outcomes only become more pronounced as youth move further through the system.^{31,32}

Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Rhode Island

	% OF TOTAL CHILD POPULATION, 2020	% OF JUVENILE OFFENSES* REFERRED TO FAMILY COURT, 2022	% OF YOUTH AT THE TRAINING SCHOOL, 2022
American Indian	<1%	NA	2%
Asian	3%	1%	1%
Black	6%	24%	24%
Hispanic	27%	14%	42%
Multiracial	8%	NA	6%
Pacific Islander	<1%	NA	1%
White	53%	39%	24%
Unknown/Other	NA	23%	1%
TOTAL	209,785	3,708	180

Sources: Rhode Island Child Population data by race are from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 Census. Juvenile Offenses Referred to the Family Court are from Rhode Island Family Court, *2022 Juvenile Offense Report*. Youth at the Training School data are from the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families, RICHIST, 2022. For Census and Training School Data, Hispanic children may be of any of the race categories. Race categories are non-Hispanic. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

* In 2022, 2,084 juveniles were referred to the Family Court for 3,708 wayward/delinquent offenses. Percentages are based on the offense referrals. A Juvenile can be referred for more than one offense. Race and ethnicity is determined by the the police or school department making the offense referral.

Input Sessions

In addition to the focus groups, we held three separate input sessions with a parent, caseworkers of justice-involved youth, and another sample of youth to see what resonated with them and what they might want to add from their perspective. In each input session, we shared the overarching themes we had identified in the original focus groups, and the explanatory quotes we received from youth. After presenting the quotes, each group was asked a series of five questions:

- What were your first impressions?
- What surprised you?
- What did you agree with?
- From a caseworker/parent/youth perspective, what would you add?
- If you could change one thing about the juvenile justice system, what would you change?

Youth

Tides Family Services recruited five participants for an input session. All youth were from Providence and ranged in age from 14-18.

These youth agreed that racism is a huge issue that impacted their experience with the justice system and echoed what the youth in the focus groups had to say about time at the Rhode Island Training School.

“I feel like what they said about being Black and that being a felony is right.”

“We should all be equal and the consequences should all be equal. It shouldn't be based on your skin or how the judge is feeling that day.”

“The Training School was boring... You gotta be made for that.. or you'll go crazy. I came out of my cell four times a day. I had a bed, a desk, and this little window.”

“For the kids at the Training School because they were running from their parent – that's not fair - 'cause the parent [messed] up.”

Youth really wanted to have a different court experience.

“Just imagine standing in front of someone with a black gown on. You don't know what's going through their mind, you don't know what their day looked like, who they've seen, who aggravated them.”

“When I was going to court, the whole courtroom was just filled with mad detectives. I was like, I gotta talk in front of all these people?”

“Maybe have a smaller room for just your case.”

Youth also echoed **the need for more after school programming and opportunities to take classes to prepare them for a profession or trade.**

“What they said about having a CNA program – yes. Add culinary classes, baking, barber school, cosmetology.”

Parent

Our parent participant emphasized that **hearing the experiences of youth is essential** because their voice is often lost, and engaging youth, as well as their family, in the process will help youth be more successful after system involvement.

“...it's really interesting to hear the kids' point of view because that's one of the aspects of the system that just doesn't work at all. The kids literally have no voice ... from the start from with the police through the courts the kids had no voice at all.”

“If the family isn't involved in helping the kids, they're not gonna succeed once they leave the system so you want to get the family involved.”

The parent echoed what youth had to say about court proceedings, including the **lack of plain language**, and added that **families want to be engaged** and not made to feel like they have failed. She also noted the large financial toll of hiring a lawyer for their case.

“...there was a real disdain for parents coming from the Court and from the police just the sense that you know because our kid had done something wrong that somehow we weren't good enough parents, and therefore we shouldn't be included or part of it.”

“We actually ended up spending over \$40,000 on the lawyer for our [child] and it was like we were paying for a guide through the system because nobody was telling us what was happening.”

“He...never understood what happened in court. Every time we left court he would say to us what happened? what does that mean? and we would have to explain it to him.”

Our parent participant also expressed **concerns about youth being questioned by school resource officers (SROs) in schools.**

“...the officer and the principal put him in a room and basically forced him to tell them everything and he was not read his Miranda Rights at that point so he was basically interviewed for information that would [later] work against him without us present and without a lawyer.”

Caseworkers

The caseworkers were also recruited from Tides Family Services. Caseworkers have a unique and important perspective, as they work directly with youth every day. We conducted one input session with 13 caseworkers. Their experience with justice-involved youth ranged from less than one year to over 10 years.

Caseworkers expressed many frustrations with the system as it currently functions, but primarily, the overwhelming sentiment that there is **a lack of prevention opportunities and a lack of appropriate placements.**

“There’s nothing in place for prevention. Nothing there. Because going through the court system is an intervention. Being arrested is an intervention. It does not have to go as far as that. But that’s where the juvenile [hearing] board comes in, where they go before their peers instead of going before you know somebody with a robe. To my knowledge, that’s really the only preventative, anything that is even in place.”

“A kid will stay at the [Rhode Island Training School] because they’re waiting for a placement. I think that’s wrong.”

The caseworkers identified **truancy** as a contributor to increased youth contact with the court system and the school-to-prison pipeline.

“We should be looking at it as a system. Truancy is a red flag that there’s something else going on for that kid. And also we should be intervening with this kid now to try to prevent them from getting further down the juvenile justice pipeline.”

Some caseworkers were surprised that youth expressed how confined they feel at the Rhode Island Training School, because the caseworkers have often seen with the youth they serve that **the Rhode Island Training School is meeting a need they cannot fill elsewhere.**

“...most of these kids love going to the Training School because it is a chill spot for them.”

“Their friends are there, they like the staff.”

“Sometimes I think, they don’t mind going to the Training School, they’re getting a need met there at the same time. There are opportunities for recreation, opportunities for socialization, and a lot of structure, predictability. So, if we could meet those needs better in the community, then maybe they wouldn’t be seeking that need.”

Caseworkers worried that the way the system currently functions provides greater opportunities for **trauma** than for rehabilitation, and that there was major disconnection between systems.

“So they’re getting arrested by the police, they’re getting sent through Family Court, then they’re going to the Training School. They’re literally identifying that their mental health, it’s coming to a head in the Training School. And then if they don’t get enough support, the cycle continues. But these systems are not communicating. They get a consequence for it, which is traumatic. But they’re also saying they don’t even understand what’s happening at court because nobody’s speaking their language or allowing them to have a voice. Then they go to the Training School where they feel like they’re locked in a room and nobody’s talking to them. There’s no processing of anything and they just keep getting sent to a different system who doesn’t understand them. There’s no communication, but each stop has a trauma attached to it.”

“...treating kids like little adults obviously always does nothing but tarnish them and hurt them and not give them chance to change while their brains are still developing, and their emotional responses are still growing. And everything that we become as an adult is...directly related to our childhoods. And so many of our kids get that robbed all day. It’s very sad.”

“I don’t think that any kid should be charged as an adult. That is my own moral belief...if you’re under 18, especially with trauma, with everything that can happen to a kid, I just don’t think any kid should be charged as an adult.”



Recommendations

Children and youth are not “little” adults, and we know they think and respond differently to situations than adults do. A successful juvenile justice system prioritizes prevention, diversion, and if system involvement is necessary, an environment that promotes rehabilitation and restorative justice.

Address the trauma many youth have experienced and continue to experience.

- Advance policies like the *Trauma-Informed Schools Act* which creates a universal approach designed to help students who have experienced trauma by helping to create positive student-teacher relationships, improve students’ sense of belonging, build safe schools, and increase academic outcomes.
- Provide greater opportunities for mental health support – including greater access to community-based mental health counseling and school-based counseling.
- Prioritize funding for more community-based alternatives to detention.

Reduce school-based referrals to the juvenile justice system.

- Remove SROs from schools, and replace them with restorative justice coordinators, school counselors, and school psychologists.
- Truancy should be treated as a multisystemic issue that can be addressed through school and community intervention and should not be an entry-point into the juvenile justice system.

Create more opportunities for restorative justice practices.

- Increase the capacity of Juvenile Hearing Boards in every community.
- For low-level offenses, ensure that all youth, regardless of race, neighborhood, or family income level, are offered the opportunity to participate in a Juvenile Hearing Board.

Examine and address racial and ethnic disparities at all points in the juvenile justice system.

- Regularly analyze data disaggregated by race and ethnicity at all decision points of the juvenile justice system.
- Implement the use of objective screening tools like the RAI (Risk Assessment Instrument) for youth being considered for secure detention at arrest.

Recruit and retain People of Color, and those with lived experience to work in all areas of the juvenile justice system.

Provide youth and families with clear and comprehensive education about their rights and court processes.

Prohibit the detention of children under the age of 14 at the Rhode Island Training School.

Codify policies that prohibit the questioning of a minor without their parent/guardian, or lawyer present.

Institute practices that support youth and families during court proceedings.

- Provide smaller rooms where a youth and their parent are brought in for just their case to be heard.
- Allow space for youth and parents to have conversations with their legal representation about their case.
- Have conversations about their case in simple, easy-to-understand terms that youth and family members can follow.

Provide free and accessible opportunities for youth to participate in a variety of out-of-school time, recreational, educational, and workforce development programs in the community.

- Expand access to safe, affordable, high-quality out-of-school time programs and recreational activities by creating a dedicated funding stream to support these programs.
- Create and maintain free and accessible opportunities for recreation during the summer months.
- Provide more education and training programs (culinary, cosmetology, nursing, etc.).
- Offer job locating and training support for youth of working age (14+).

Seek funding to conduct additional focus groups to get more youth and family perspectives on their experiences with all aspects of the juvenile justice system, including prevention programs, diversion programs, and Juvenile Hearing Boards.



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