

THE PROBATION EXPERIENCE PROJECT

Insights From Young People and Families

What is and isn't working in youth probation according to young people and families who have experienced it? To find out, the Probation Experience Project collected insights directly from young people and family members through surveys and focus groups. Based on these findings, the project team created recommendations to share with youth justice practitioners, advocates and policy makers.

This document summarizes five of the recommendations to make youth probation more equitable, supportive and less punitive, while increasing family and community involvement.

142,900

young people were on probation in 2021.¹ **60%** could be diverted to community supports.²

RECOMMENDATIONS

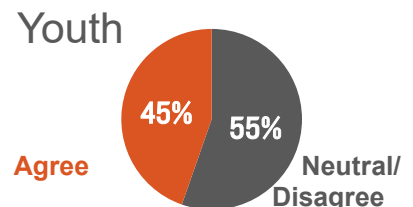
- **Engage all young people who are on probation in activities that help them identify their strengths and set their goals in areas such as education, work, relationships, health and creativity.** These should be collaborative activities throughout the probation process rather than simply an assessment at the start. Young people should not need to be placed on probation to access these kinds of activities.

Across focus groups and surveys, young people and families shared that they want to feel heard and respected and be provided individualized support. In 90% of the focus groups, young people and their families reported a lack of meaningful activities and educational opportunities while on probation.

- **Frequently collect, analyze and respond to data on access to — and satisfaction with — probation services and conditions, disaggregated by race, ethnicity and other social identities.**

In nearly two-thirds of the focus groups, young people and family members shared that they were affected by racial and social biases during the probation process. On the surveys, just 40% of young people agreed that probation services, supports or resources related to their racial, ethnic or cultural background.

Q: I felt like my probation officer really cared about me and my future.



¹ *Easy Access to Juvenile Court Statistics: 1985-2021*, online at <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezajcs/>

² *Transforming Juvenile Probation: A Vision for Getting it Right*, Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018, online at <https://www.aecf.org/resources/transforming-juvenile-probation>

- **Collaborate with young people in the design of their probation plan, including what accountability and incentives look like during their probation experience.**

Young people and families said their probation requirements were complicated and burdensome, and only half of young people surveyed felt probation prepared them for success after it ended. Involving young people in decision-making about their probation plans recognizes their agency, fosters a sense of ownership and enhances the effectiveness of the rehabilitation process.

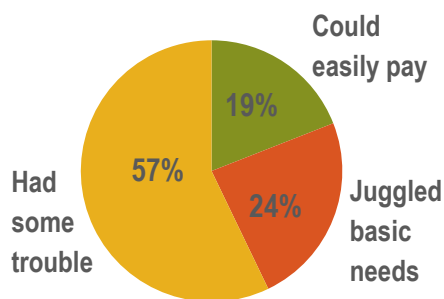
- **Ensure that probation officers are well-prepared to support young people and their families.**

Fewer than half of young people surveyed agreed that their probation officers cared about them and their future. During the focus groups, many young people and family members discussed negative experiences with probation officers. To effectively serve young people and their families, probation officers should have similar demographics to the communities they serve, have a desire to help young people succeed and understand adolescent development and the issues young people may face.

- **Remove all probation and court fines, costs and fees for young people.**

Court costs, fines and fees place immense pressure on young people and their families, and family members mentioned this as a barrier to their ability to support their young person on probation. More than three-quarters of

Q. How did the fees and fines affect you and your household?



family members who were required to pay probation-related costs for their young person said they either had some trouble paying them or had to juggle paying for basic needs to pay the fees.

WHY IT MATTERS

Too often, the perspectives of young people and families have been overlooked during discussions of probation policy and practice. The Probation Experience Project found that insights from young people and families can lead to solutions that will improve youth probation and enable more young people to thrive in their communities.

ABOUT THE PROBATION EXPERIENCE PROJECT

The project was a partnership between the Casey Foundation, [Child Trends](#), young people and family members with probation experience and community-based organizations in six states. The local partners hired young people with probation experience to conduct 22 focus groups and survey more than 100 young people and families who have experienced probation.

LOCAL RESEARCH PARTNERS

[Camden County Family Support Organization](#) (New Jersey)

[Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County, Inc.](#) (California)

[Progeny of Destination Innovation](#) (Kansas)

[La Plazita Institute](#) and [Albuquerque Justice For Youth Community Collaborative](#) (New Mexico)

[VOICES](#) (Indiana)

[Strong Arms of MS](#) (Mississippi)