



Organizing for a Healthy Justice System Positive Youth Justice Initiative Final Evaluation Report Highlights

A Blueprint for Transforming the Juvenile Justice System

Effective Strategies from the Positive Youth Justice Initiative

The Positive Youth Justice Initiative (PYJI) seeks to transform the California juvenile justice system through a broad-based, multiyear effort grounded in the principles of positive youth development and focused on aligning policy and practice with young people's developmental stages. In early 2017, PYJI funded community-based organizations (CBOs) in 11 counties across California to work collaboratively with local coalitions to accelerate a statewide movement toward a more youth development-focused, racially just juvenile justice system.

These CBOs represent communities of color that are overly represented in and inequitably treated by the juvenile justice system. Despite having limited resources compared with the systems they have been working to change, these organizations and their community partners are leading the call against mass incarceration and in support of disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline and eliminating racial disparities throughout the system.

PYJI Community Partners

- Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (Alameda County)
- Fathers & Families of San Joaquin
- Fresno Barrios Unidos
- Resilience Orange County
- RYSE Youth Center (Contra Costa County)
- Sacramento Area Congregations Together
- San Diego Organizing Project
- Sigma Beta Xi, Inc. (Riverside County)
- Silicon Valley De-Bug (Santa Clara County)
- Young Women's Freedom Center (San Francisco County)
- Youth Justice Coalition (Los Angeles County)

PYJI Achievements

PYJI partners and their coalition members made substantial contributions to reforming local policies related to transforming the youth justice system in areas such as:

- improving school climate,
- reducing or eliminating law enforcement on school campuses,
- ending the use of voluntary or informal probation for youth,
- reframing law enforcement's perception of young people,
- diverting youth from justice system involvement, and
- ending youth incarceration.

In addition, in several counties, PYJI partners and their coalition members, including youth, gained or held seats at numerous policymaking tables that impact decision making related to juvenile justice or education. At the state level, PYJI partners and their local coalitions provided their research and testimony to inform California state legislation in areas including the age for juvenile court jurisdiction, sentencing guidelines, and standards for use of lethal force by law enforcement. (See additional details in the Impact Briefs at <https://www.shfcenter.org/pyji/evaluation>)

Effective Strategies

Focusing Funding on Community Organizing and Advocacy

PYJI began funding community organizing and advocacy after trying other approaches to juvenile justice reform and finding them ineffective.¹ PYJI specifically funds organizations with credibility in the community and experience in community organizing, base building, and advocacy work. As described above, local advocates have been successful in achieving the kinds of changes needed to support positive youth development for youth involved in the juvenile justice system as well as all youth.

Increasing Organizational Capacity

PYJI partners highlighted three primary lessons learned during the grant period related to increasing organizational capacity for youth justice organizing and advocacy:

- The movement to transform the youth justice system must be led by people, including youth, who are most impacted by the system;
- Young people's needs—including providing basic needs and support in coping with their trauma—must be appropriately addressed before engaging them in organizing and advocacy work; and

¹ Resource Development Associates. (2018). Moving positive youth justice forward: Lessons learned from investing in public systems. https://www.shfcenter.org/assets/PYJI/Moving_Positive_Youth_Justice_Forward_April_2018.pdf



- Supporting local organizations to pursue issues affecting their individual counties as well as bringing partners together in a statewide collaborative effort promotes a healthy youth justice system.

Growing Youth Leadership

Support from PYJI helped many partners build out their youth organizer staffing and programming, which, in turn, deepened partners' ability to engage young people and support them in healing from past trauma, skill building, peer collaboration, and advocacy efforts. Through their PYJI engagement, young people, many of whom have personal experience with the juvenile justice system, gained a voice, expanded and strengthened their skills, and became community leaders for formerly incarcerated, system-impacted youth and their communities.

Connecting the Organizers

PYJI's deliberate focus on creating space to build connections within the PYJI network helped bolster the statewide movement around youth justice organizing and advocacy. Nearly all PYJI partners identified building connections and relationships with other PYJI organizations as one of the most valuable and impactful aspects of PYJI. Opportunities were designed to facilitate networking, relationship

building, learning, healing, and designing strategy. Partners considered these opportunities to be helpful and critical in building their collective capacity to organize for youth justice system transformation.

Looking to the Future

Drawing on these strategies and the accomplishments they supported, the PYJI evaluation resulted in several recommendations.

- **Support young people's participation in the transformation of the juvenile justice system.**
To engage the youth most impacted by the juvenile justice system in the advocacy for change, their participation must be supported. This includes providing resources to pay youth for participating, providing opportunities to develop young people's leadership, and connecting youth with healing practices and wraparound services to address trauma and assist with reentry.
- **Connect local and statewide efforts.**
Opportunities to amplify PYJI's statewide momentum include designing a collective approach to transforming the youth justice system, developing an initiative-wide position on specific youth justice topics, and implementing a youth-focused branding and marketing campaign for the movement. There are also opportunities to align PYJI more closely with other statewide networks that have similar goals, such as the Alliance for



Boys and Men of Color and the California Alliance for Youth and Community Justice.

- **Build partnership, relationship building, and shared learning opportunities.** Multiple approaches to connecting organizers are needed. In addition to the in-person learning communities that are hallmarks of PYJI, recommended activities include interactive monthly calls, healing circles conducted via videoconferencing or in-person, and peer-learning spaces for young people.
- **Fund movement work based on community organizing and advocacy and led by the people who are most impacted.** Investing in communities and prioritizing resources for the organizations and coalitions that lead direct action and are closest to the work are seen as essential to success. Strategies include limiting restricted funding and making all funding available for general operations.

This summary is based on an evaluation conducted by Evident Change (formerly the National Council on Crime and Delinquency) from 2017-2020. [Access the full report](https://www.shfcenter.org/pyji/evaluation) and <https://www.shfcenter.org/pyji/evaluation> for other PYJI evaluation reports.

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PYJI Partners