



YOUTH VOICES:

Positive Youth Justice Initiative Evaluation Youth Focus Group Highlights



“Most of the time [probation officers] don’t really know you except what you did. [It’s better] when they take the time to get to know you and see what’s going on with you at home.”
[Youth talking about experience with Probation officers]

“[Program staff] pointed out things about me that I never noticed... They would help me improve on those things. I always wanted things to be my way, but because of the group helping me, I don’t see things that way anymore.”
[Youth talking about experience in a group counseling program]

BACKGROUND

This report presents key findings from the youth focus groups conducted as part of the evaluation of Sierra Health Foundation’s Positive Youth Justice Initiative (PYJI). The foundation launched PYJI in 2012 in response to research on the poor outcomes for juvenile justice involved youth, especially crossover youth – those who have been involved in both juvenile justice and child welfare systems.¹ PYJI aims to shift juvenile justice practice and policy, and improve the health and well-being of crossover youth through system-level reforms that invest in youth, help treat previous trauma, provide wraparound service delivery and strengthen local infrastructure. The initiative promotes these reforms through grants and technical support to four California counties – Alameda, San Diego, San Joaquin and Solano.

Sierra Health Foundation contracted with Resource Development Associates (RDA) to carry out an evaluation of the implementation and early impact of PYJI. (See www.sierrahealth.org/pyji/evaluation for details on the methods and findings.) As part of the evaluation, RDA conducted focus groups with young people in the juvenile justice systems in each of the four counties.

The participants’ responses provide valuable insights into youth experiences and their perspective on the systems that are the focus of PYJI. Because focus groups are not able to establish how many youth in the systems have had similar experiences, this report presents high-level findings that were supported by youth from more than one county.

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

In the last quarter of 2014, each of the PYJI counties recruited crossover youth to participate in focus groups. Twenty of the 30 participants (6-9 youth in each focus group) were male and 10 were female. Their ages ranged from 13 to 19. The youth had a range of experience with the juvenile justice system, including experiences in juvenile detention facilities. Youth were asked about their experiences with juvenile justice and child welfare systems, the extent of their involvement in planning and decision-making, their participation in programs and services, and the alignment of services and approaches with positive youth development and trauma-informed care approaches.



¹The Positive Youth Justice Initiative is a Sierra Health Foundation initiative managed by the Center for Health Program Management, with additional funding from The California Endowment and The California Wellness Foundation.

CROSS-CUTTING FINDINGS

Most youth participating in the focus groups reported that the quality of their relationships with probation officers, schools and service providers depended on individual staff people, rather than on any systematic approaches or philosophies within these institutions. Participants from each of the counties discussed how their experiences differed based on the individual probation officers, judges, teachers, school staff, correctional officers and counselors they interacted with. Comments included:

- *“If you have a bad probation officer and bad judge, then it won’t work out for you. But if you have a good probation officer even if you have a bad judge, you’ll be okay because your probation officer can advocate for you.”*
- *“Some POs, they want you to get off [probation] and they help you. Some don’t care what you do, they’ll just lock you up. They don’t contact you unless you are messing up. My PO [who’s good] calls me every week and asks how I’m doing in school.”*
- *“I would talk to [certain staff member] in the detention. He is a counselor. He’s different from the other COs. He sprays your room so it smells good. He’ll bring his iPad.”*

Participants named several qualities aligned with positive youth development and trauma-informed care they found helpful in the adults they interact with in various systems. When asked to describe their relationship with their probation officers, teachers and juvenile hall staff, focus group participants expressed that they appreciated adults who saw them as more than their offense, took the time to get to know them, were willing to work with them when they made mistakes, listened to what they had to say, and provided support to help them graduate and get off probation. The following quotes illustrate their comments.

- *“Even little good steps, when they recognize that, and they keep it real with you when you are messing up and tell you, then you start feeling confident and [they do] not make you feel like you are less than anyone else because you made a mistake.”*
- *“You can tell the ones [in juvenile hall] that care and they’ll talk to you about your situation and what you need to do when you get back [into the community].”*

Focus group participants described ways in which unfair, disproportionately harsh, and impersonal treatment have negatively impacted their experiences in various systems. Many youth reported believing that racism and favoritism have affected how they are treated by probation, detention, school and program staff, with some detailing experiences in which they felt racism impacted the length and type of sentence they were given in court. A few participants also described incidences where they felt their probation officers misrepresented them in court because they were unable or unwilling to hear their perspectives. Most focus group participants who had spent time in juvenile hall voiced that punishment in juvenile hall felt disproportionate to their behavior and often seemed random and overly punitive. In addition, a few youth described individual correctional officers they felt were particularly harsh. Comments reflecting these experiences include:

- *“In juvie all they do now is spray us with pepper spray and they spray anyone who’s in the area even if they aren’t involved in the fight.”*

- *“That stuff—anything you do—they want you in the system and you African American, so they want you. If you ride a bike without a helmet—they going to take you to jail...”*
- *“Instead of calling your parents when something goes wrong, teachers just contact your PO to get you in trouble.”*

Some participants described feeling judged or treated differently by their peers, teachers and neighbors because of their probation status.

Youth from three of the counties specifically stated that when their probation officers showed up to their schools armed and dressed in uniform, it impacted how their peers and teachers perceived them. Some participants described that the extent to which youth are treated differently based on their probation status can depend in part on how common it is for youth to be on probation in their schools or communities.

- *“Last time my PO went to the school and brought me outside like a couple minutes before lunchtime. She was talking to me for a while. Then everyone came out...it felt weird. I felt like they thought differently of me. No one really knew I had a PO before.”*
- *“A girl on house arrest seemed weird to people. My struggle is how do you define that I’m a bad person if you don’t really know me?”*

At the same time, a couple of the youth indicated that some teachers encourage them to do well in school and pursue college. One youth also felt that probation’s involvement in his education was beneficial, saying: *“The involvement of the school with the probation system increases better school grades, because good grades is part of the probation requirements.”*

The extent to which the youth had participated in multidisciplinary team meetings was unclear.

Multidisciplinary team meetings are part of the wraparound approach to services encouraged by PYJI. While some youth indicated participating in meetings with their probation officers, parents and sometimes social workers or program staff, it was not clear how frequently these meetings occurred or the extent to which they were aligned with a multidisciplinary team model. Some youth reported that they wished there were more open communication channels between themselves, their family and their probation officer, with several youth indicating they wished their probation officers would communicate directly with them, rather than through their parents. Comments related to this kind of communication include:

- *“You are going to have meetings once you get on probation. You have a meeting whenever your probation officer wants to meet with you. Whoever she wants to bring in. Just a checkup meeting to see how you are doing, what are some concerns that probation is having. Sometimes [the meetings] have parent or person from another program involved and sometimes not.”*
- *“My mom and me don’t always get along, so when she [the PO] tells my mom something and doesn’t tell me, I don’t get the whole story. I would like it if she could also call me directly.”*

Many youth did not feel like they were involved in deciding what programs they would participate in.

Some of those involved in programs were positive about their benefits. While it seemed that a few focus group participants were given a referral or suggestion for a program from a probation officer or other adult, in most cases participants noted that they were simply told by their probation officer that they had to participate in a particular program. When asked what types of programs they would find beneficial, some participants responded that they would be interested in programs that were more aligned with their interests and needs, particularly paid job training programs and resources to help them find employment. Several youth expressed interest in sports-oriented activities and programs, and a few also indicated that they would like more opportunities to receive mental health counseling. The following comments illustrate some of the responses related to programs.

- *“They should tell us more things like more programs where they can help us get jobs. Because we’re struggling.”*
- *“I need someone to talk to because I think everything I don’t talk about is what stops me from doing what I should be doing. If I talked to someone first and then got the academic support, I would do better.”*
- *“Now [that I am in the program] I wake up and have a purpose. I want to go to school, want to go to REACH, and meet someone new. Before I just wanted to smoke weed and go steal stuff.”*

Both across and within counties, focus group participants varied in their openness about their experiences and needs and the extent to which they expressed a sense of empowerment about their future.

Some youth openly discussed their experiences in the juvenile justice system, shared their experiences and clearly articulated their needs. A few youth expressed a sentiment that their feelings were irrelevant because they had no control or choice in the terms of their probation and had a harder time imagining what types of programs could be beneficial and engaging for them. While it is not possible to draw conclusions from the focus groups, youth who had participated in youth empowerment programs were more open in expressing their needs and their ideas of how the justice system could better serve them, indicating that the types of programs youth were involved in may affect their ability to understand and articulate their needs and to have a vision for what a better system might look like.

Positive Youth Justice Initiative Implementation

The sites participating in PYJI continue to implement strategies to improve conditions for crossover youth. Approaches the counties are taking to reform their juvenile justice systems include training staff on trauma-informed care and positive youth development, using team-based decision making to engage caregivers and youth in case planning, and changing policies and procedures to address the racial disparities within the juvenile justice system. A report on progress toward overall systems change will be released by the end of 2015.