

Organizing for a Healthy Justice System

Positive Youth Justice Initiative Final Evaluation Report



Acknowledgments

The NCCD evaluation team would like to acknowledge and thank the Sierra Health Foundation and all of the Positive Youth Justice Initiative (PYJI) grantee partners and coalition members for their time, thought partnership, and support in our efforts to evaluate this phase of PYJI. PYJI partners and coalition members graciously participated in various data collection activities over the past few years, allowing us to capture the impactful work they undertake to bring justice, healing, and further investment to their communities. Throughout the evaluation process, PYJI partners and Sierra Health Foundation staff provided valuable insight and feedback that supported collaborative learning of how to support communities in strengthening local and statewide infrastructure for organizing and advocacy.

The evaluation team also would like to thank the PYJI Evaluation Advisory Committee, which helped shape the vision, plan, metrics, and mechanics of this evaluation. A special acknowledgement goes to the late Dr. Prince White, deputy director of Urban Peace Movement in Oakland, whose connection with youth in the PYJI network and commitment to uplifting youth voice were instrumental to centering youth voice in this evaluation. Prince's leadership on the PYJI Evaluation Advisory Committee and willingness to share his expertise and critiques about research and evaluation helped set the tone and approach for the collaborative nature of this evaluation.

Suggested Citation

Glesmann, C., & Sebahtu, A. (2020). *Organizing for a healthy justice system: Positive Youth Justice Initiative (PYJI) final evaluation report*. National Council on Crime and Delinquency.

Photo Credit

Photos provided by The Center at Sierra Health Foundation.

* As of December 1, 2020, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) was renamed Evident Change.

Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	5
Evaluation Methods	7
Learnings About Organizing for a Healthy Justice System	8
Growing Youth Leadership	8
Connecting the Organizers	14
Organizing for Policy Wins	17
Changes in the Advocacy Landscape and Community Power	22
Lessons Learned about Organizing for a Healthy Justice System	23
Emerging Issues and Future Directions for Youth Justice Organizing	24
What Sets PYJI Support Apart from Other Types of Funding?	25
Discussion and Recommendations	27
Appendix: Phases of PYJI	30

Executive Summary

Introduction

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.¹ 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 juvenile justice system.²

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. The following organizations are PYJI's grantee 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)

The National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) evaluated this phase of PYJI, with a focus on gleaning and uplifting information that the Sierra Health Foundation and its philanthropic partners can use to support communities in strengthening local infrastructure for organizing and advocacy toward a healthier youth justice system.

¹ PYJI is funded by Sierra Health Foundation, The California Endowment, The California Wellness Foundation, and the Zellerbach Family Foundation and is managed by The Center at Sierra Health Foundation (The Center).

² For more information about the history of PYJI before 2017, see the appendix in this report and details at <https://www.shfcenter.org/pyji/evaluation>

Learnings About Organizing for a Healthy Justice System

The evaluation produced the following key findings.

Growing Youth Leadership

PYJI helped increase funded partners' organizational capacity for promoting young people's growth, development, and peer learning and connection in the youth justice organizing and advocacy space. Support from PYJI helped many partners intentionally build out their youth organizer staffing and programming, which, in turn, deepened partners' ability to engage young people and support them in 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 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. Throughout the initiative, partners relished opportunities—including participating in learning community events hosted by The Center at Sierra Health Foundation (The Center), peer-to-peer learning exchanges among PYJI partners, and the PYJI Youth Organizer Leadership Program—to engage in 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.

Organizing for Policy Wins

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.

Lessons Learned About Organizing for a Healthy Justice System

PYJI partners highlighted three primary lessons learned during the grant period related to increasing organizational capacity for youth justice organizing and advocacy: (1) the movement to transform the youth justice system must be led by people, including youth, who are most impacted by the system; (2) 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 (3) by supporting local organizations to pursue issues affecting their individual counties as well as bringing partners together in a statewide collaborative effort, PYJI has played a role in promoting a healthy youth justice system.

Discussion

In the context of PYJI's focus on supporting funded partners to increase their organizational capacity related to youth justice organizing and providing opportunities for partners and coalition members across the state to learn from and collaborate with each other, several partners described observing noticeable shifts in their county's local advocacy landscape and/or in their community power to advocate for a healthy justice system since the start of their PYJI grants.

These shifts can be seen in many funded partners' counties over the past three years. They include the implementation of policy changes that provide restorative and trauma-informed practices in schools and juvenile justice systems and the appointment of PYJI partners and their coalition members—including young people—to influential policymaking tables. Other shifts can be seen in partners' efforts to form or strengthen local coalitions to drive youth justice policy reform and the conversations that partners are engaging in with their local system partners such as probation, police, and the district attorney to spur reform.

As the evaluation period wrapped up, PYJI partners' work to transform the youth justice system remains ongoing and, in some cases, may shift in terms of approaches or strategies, to respond to emerging priorities or as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Partners' grants will continue at least through June 2021 based on the continued availability of funding.

Recommendations

The following recommendations for The Center to consider emerged from the evaluation data.

- 1. Continue to support and strengthen young people's PYJI participation.** Several partners and several youth recommended increasing youth engagement in PYJI-supported organizing and advocacy. This

includes providing resources to pay youth for participating, increasing the number of youth who are involved, providing more or expanded opportunities to develop young people's leadership, and providing tools and resources to connect youth with healing practices and wraparound services to address trauma, assist with reentry, and meet other needs that youth-organizing CBOs may not offer.

- 2. Continue to sharpen PYJI's statewide focus.**

Several partners recommended exploring opportunities to amplify PYJI's statewide momentum, including increasing the focus on connecting local and statewide efforts, increasing opportunities for a collective approach to transforming the youth justice system, developing an initiative-wide position on specific youth justice topics, and developing a branding and marketing angle for the movement that will appeal to youth. There are also opportunities to align the initiative 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.

- 3. Continue to support and expand partnership, relationship building, and shared learning opportunities in the PYJI network.** Several partners recommended ways to strengthen the opportunities for connection that are hallmarks of PYJI. This includes finding ways to collaborate in addition to the in-person learning communities; interactive monthly calls and healing circles conducted via videoconferencing may help accomplish this. Other suggestions include continuing to support peer-learning spaces for young people to connect and continuing to offer consulting between partners and The Center, which allows for strategizing and regular communication.

4. Continue to fund movement work led by the people who are most impacted.

A few partners emphasized the need to invest in communities and prioritize providing resources for the organizations and coalitions that lead direct action and are closest to the work. Strategies include limiting restricted funding and making all funding available for general operations; this recommendation is particularly salient in the context of COVID-19, as youth justice organizations work to help young people meet their immediate needs while continuing to develop an organizing space, and this could also apply post-pandemic. Another recommendation is to provide resources to fund capital such as land, building, and property improvements.

5. Organize other funders and continue to encourage them to shift their support to community organizing and advocacy.

A As in previous evaluation reports, several partners described a need for more funders

to shift their approach to funding community organizing and advocacy. While partners acknowledge the leadership of Sierra Health Foundation and other foundations that have supported PYJI in this arena, they also see further opportunity for the foundation to influence the broader ecosystem around community organizing, base building, and advocacy work. One way for Sierra Health Foundation to potentially use its influence could be for the foundation and other funders that support PYJI to publish or discuss, from their perspective, their return on investment and lessons learned from supporting CBOs and their local coalitions during this phase of PYJI compared with previous phases that funded systems to reform and improve themselves. This discussion, which could take various forms such as a written report and/or a webcast, could build upon and respond to the 2018 publication that describes lessons learned from the earlier phases of PYJI.³

³ 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

Introduction

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.⁴ In early 2017, PYJI funded community-based organizations (CBOs) in 11 California counties to advance positive youth justice and work collaboratively with local coalitions to develop and implement reform activities. The goal of this phase of PYJI is to help communities across California transform juvenile justice practice and policy into a more just, effective system aligned with young people's developmental needs.

PYJI Overview

PYJI is based on several core elements of juvenile justice, described briefly below, that support young people's well-being.

- Shift the juvenile justice field toward a positive youth development frame. Positive youth

development is a strengths-based approach to working with young people. It emphasizes youth assets, development of pro-social skills, and connections with supportive, positive peers and adults.

- Develop and implement trauma-informed practices and policies across the juvenile justice system to acknowledge the deeply rooted trauma that system-involved young people likely have experienced, facilitate healing, and avoid retraumatization.
- Deliver wraparound services in a strengths-based, culturally responsive, and supportive manner in the least restrictive environment.
- Improve operational capacity to assess and meet young people's developmental, physical, and mental health needs, and reduce racial and ethnic disparities.



⁴ PYJI is funded by Sierra Health Foundation, The California Endowment, The California Wellness Foundation, and the Zellerbach Family Foundation and is managed by The Center at Sierra Health Foundation (The Center).



Organizing for a Healthy Justice System

Pivoting from the initiative’s previous strategy of funding probation agencies and other system partners,⁵ this phase of PYJI—called Organizing for a Healthy Justice System—provided funding to grassroots organizations in 11 California counties. These organizations collaborated with local coalitions to accelerate a statewide movement toward a more youth development-focused juvenile justice system. The 11 organizations 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. The Organizing for a Healthy Justice System phase of PYJI supports the communities most impacted by the juvenile justice system in using their collective expertise and passion to bring about change.

PYJI coalitions identified several policy themes to address through their work, including participatory defense for youth potentially facing adult court,

justice reinvestment, district attorney accountability, intersections of immigration and juvenile and criminal justice systems, probation transformation, school climate reform, and other issues identified by the young people with whom these organizations work. PYJI coalitions focused on developing youth leadership in policy change, identifying the support they need to be impactful, and taking inventory of the assets and expertise within their coalitions.

The following organizations are grantee partners for this phase.

- 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)

⁵ For more information about the history of PYJI before 2017, see the appendix in this report and details at <https://www.shfcenter.org/pyji/evaluation>

Evaluation Methods

About the Evaluation

The National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) evaluated this phase of PYJI, from early 2017 through summer 2020, with a focus on gleaning and uplifting information that the Sierra Health Foundation and its philanthropic partners can use to support communities to strengthen local infrastructure for organizing and advocacy toward a healthier youth justice system. The evaluation intended to identify key themes and trends, successes, challenges, and lessons learned, and it included exploring changes (if any) during the grant period in the advocacy environment and in community power to advocate for a healthy justice system in the counties with funded partners.

The evaluation design sought to minimize the data collection burden on evaluation participants and relied mainly on existing data and using scheduled PYJI activities such as learning communities—two-day facilitated gatherings for all funded partners and coalition members—as data-gathering opportunities. An evaluation advisory committee composed of several representatives of PYJI partners and coalition members provided guidance on developing data collection methods and interpreting findings.

The main data sources for this report follow.

- Funded partners' semiannual progress reports submitted to The Center at Sierra Health Foundation (The Center).
- Individual interviews with funded partners. From April to July 2020, the NCCD evaluation

team interviewed nine PYJI directors and three PYJI youth organizers. Interviews explored strengths, successes, challenges, lessons learned, and next steps related to the initiative and to the overall movement to organize for a healthy youth justice system.

- A survey for young people who participated in PYJI activities. The survey focused on what respondents learned or gained from their PYJI engagement and suggestions to improve the initiative. NCCD provided the survey at the August 2019 learning community, and it was available online through December 2019. The survey analysis is based on 55 responses.

About This Report

NCCD completed interim reports for the evaluation in March 2018 and January 2019. In addition, in December 2019, NCCD and The Center published four briefs that highlight PYJI partners' efforts to transform the youth justice system.⁶

This final evaluation report, which summarizes findings from January 2017 through August 2020, highlights the overall progress and accomplishments over the course of the initiative. Due to the ongoing, long-term nature of advocacy, the findings acknowledge important steps on the journey toward policy wins, as well as policy victories themselves. The report concludes with several recommendations, drawn from key findings, for The Center to consider regarding this and potential future PYJI phases.

⁶ The interim evaluation reports and briefs can be found at <https://www.shfcenter.org/pyji/evaluation>

Learnings About Organizing for a Healthy Justice System

Growing Youth Leadership

PYJI helped increase funded partners' organizational capacity for promoting young people's growth, development, and peer learning and connection in the youth justice organizing and advocacy space. PYJI provided an opportunity for partners to intentionally build out their youth organizer staffing and programming, which deepened partners' ability to support young people in skill building 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 system-impacted youth and their communities.

Intentional Building of Youth Leadership Space and Capacity

PYJI provided partners with resources to expand their organizing work, especially with youth. This expansion included bringing on youth organizers as interns, fellows, and staff members—many of whom were youth or young adults—and developing or strengthening their organization's advocacy programming and/or youth engagement efforts.

Support from PYJI allowed many partners—including Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ), Silicon Valley De-Bug (De-Bug), Fresno Barrios Unidos, Resilience Orange County (Resilience OC), Sacramento Area





Congregations Together (Sacramento ACT), Sigma Beta Xi, and Young Women’s Freedom Center (YWFC)—to increase their organizational capacity by expanding their youth organizer staffing. In some cases, youth were brought on as part-time organizing fellows or interns, and they typically received a stipend or hourly wage; in others, youth were hired into full-time organizing jobs.

YWFC reported that PYJI resources supported the hiring and training of 30 youth organizers working on youth justice advocacy in three counties. In Santa Clara County, De-Bug partnered with CARAS, a grassroots organization, to hire an organizer to work with CARAS on participatory defense efforts. A few partners stated that providing a stipend to young people often made the difference in being able to participate in PYJI-related organizing efforts, as they needed paid work to support themselves and their families.

Several PYJI partners drew on the financial resources of the PYJI grant to hire youth organizers from directly impacted communities. Fresno Barrios Unidos reported hiring a skilled organizer who is deeply embedded in the local community. This

organizer drew on his relationships and authentic community engagement to convene and mentor a group of young men impacted by multiple systems for Fresno Barrios Unidos’ Men with Heart fellowship program. The organizer also built relationships with the local labor unions that led to placing two fellows with the ironworkers union. Resilience OC hired a youth organizer who was formerly incarcerated. This young man participated in Resilience OC’s fellowship program and now leads it. Resilience OC stated that the organizer’s experience with system involvement helps him to understand and connect with participating youth.

PYJI support also created an opportunity for several partners to use the increased engagement of youth to broaden their organizing work. For some organizations, this took the form of developing or strengthening an organizing program. In Riverside County, PYJI funding helped Sigma Beta Xi to create an advocacy program that engages youth in local juvenile justice system reform efforts. In Los Angeles, Youth Justice Coalition (YJC) drew on PYJI support to build a youth leadership core within its whole coalition, giving youth access to leadership

training, legislative work, and direct actions. In Santa Clara County, De-Bug launched, built, and sustained a youth organizing space; previously, De-Bug focused on working with families, and De-Bug continued that work under this grant.

Skill Building for Youth

Young people participating in PYJI-related activities gained and enhanced skills in areas including conducting research, speaking in public forums, and facilitating meetings. They also had opportunities to work collaboratively with their peers and develop leadership skills.

Conducting Research

PYJI youth gained research and leadership skills through collecting evidence in support of their advocacy positions. Youth from partners such as Fathers & Families of San Joaquin (FFSJ) and RYSE Youth Center reviewed information about their school district's spending for on-campus law enforcement and developed and presented policy recommendations about this issue to their local school board. FFSJ and RYSE reported that their school board subsequently did not designate a specific funding source for campus police and security, in contrast to past practice. This provided an opportunity for PYJI partners to advocate for reinvesting these resources to support restorative practices.

CURYJ, in partnership with Urban Peace Movement, engaged a group of formerly incarcerated youth—called the Dream Beyond Bars Fellows—in an intensive participatory research process to identify and advocate for alternatives to justice system involvement. The fellows reviewed documents, facilitated focus groups, collected and analyzed surveys, and wrote about their findings.⁷ This work led to advocacy, as the fellows shared their findings and advocated for changes that would lead to better conditions and outcomes for their peers.



Fellows' efforts included mobilizing young people to stop the rebuild of Camp Sweeney, a youth detention facility in Alameda County.

Public Speaking

PYJI youth strengthened their communication skills through public speaking opportunities such as participating in community forums and facilitating meetings and groups with their peers. For several PYJI partners, school-based reform was a key area of organizing that directly involved young people. In an effort to remove school resource officers from schools, youth working with Sacramento ACT shared their stories at school board meetings, provided recommendations to reduce the number of youth involved in the juvenile justice system, and served on a community hiring panel for selecting the director of school safety. In Fresno, young adults with Fresno Barrios Unidos provided personal testimony to the school district about their experiences of being negatively impacted by the school system. Fresno Barrios Unidos reported that this testimony contributed to the redirection of law enforcement engagement on school campuses.

⁷ Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice and Urban Peace Movement. (2019). *Dream beyond bars report: A youth vision for Alameda County's juvenile justice system*. http://www.curyj.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/DBB-Report-2_compressed.pdf

In San Diego, youth council members with Mid-City CAN, partnering with the San Diego Organizing Project, raised awareness about a “#SchoolsNotPrisons” campaign with a city council committee. Through this campaign, youth council members provided public comment at the Public Safety and Livable Neighborhoods Committee about reforming the city’s Community Review Board on Police Practices to promote health and avert overcriminalization, as well as designate seats for young people on the board. Youth council members showed more than 200 pledge cards they collected from community members supporting improvement of this board. Subsequent to the youth council’s efforts, the committee brought an amendment to reform the community review board to a full city council vote. This ultimately led to a measure being placed on the November 2020 ballot to replace the existing review board with a Commission on Police Practices that would operate independently of the police department and mayor.

Peer Learning and Collaboration Across PYJI Partners

PYJI supported peer learning and collaboration among youth. Through partner-to-partner opportunities for peer learning among young people, as well as the initiative-wide Youth Organizer Leadership Program (described later), PYJI provided the space for young people to meet with, learn from, share with, and forge bonds with their peers locally and statewide.

Close to two thirds (64%) of respondents to the youth survey reported that they shared knowledge with or learned from youth or adults at another PYJI organization. In qualitative responses, several survey respondents described gaining skills in networking with other young people and organizations, both within their PYJI coalition and across the state.

Over half (58%) of youth survey respondents reported learning more about county or statewide

Learning New Skills Through PYJI

Youth Survey Results (N = 55)	
Skill	Percentage
Learned new skills while working with PYJI	95%
<i>Of respondents who learned new skills, these included:</i>	
Public speaking or presenting at meetings, groups, or other events	79%
Healing practices or rituals	71%
How to lead or facilitate discussions at meetings, groups, or other events	65%
How to collect and analyze data	52%
Have been able to work more effectively in the community	95%
Feel more confident advocating for their community	95%

issues through their PYJI experience. Several respondents discussed having opportunities to increase their knowledge about organizing priorities and strategies in other counties. “I learned a lot about other organizations and got to work with a lot of amazing people from across the state,” noted one respondent.

The feedback from young people is supported by interviews with PYJI site directors and partners’ progress reports. One site director reported, “[Through PYJI] our youth build these great networks of peer networks up and down the state. This helps our youth open their eyes that the world is bigger than just my block. When they see there are more people involved, they are more inclined to stick with it.”

Spotlight on the PYJI Youth Organizer Leadership Development Program

In August 2019, after a collaborative planning process with The Center and several PYJI partners,

PYJI launched the Youth Organizer Leadership Program. The program gathered 22 young people—two per site—from the 11 PYJI partners for a six-month opportunity that helped facilitate a statewide network for youth leaders to build relationships, communicate, and strategize with each other. By incorporating healing practices and learnings, storytelling as an advocacy strategy, and knowledge building on topics such as the history of the criminal justice system and mass incarceration of communities of color, the program focused on developing participants’ leadership skills and supporting their personal and professional goals. The program also featured education and career development opportunities related to systems transformation and networking and mentorship with leaders from various sectors. Youth participated in online and in-person activities during the program, including retreats in Northern and Southern California hosted by local PYJI partners.

Voices of Youth: What Have You Learned Working With PYJI?

How to advocate for my community—speaking up and being heard.

Being trained on research strategies and tactics.

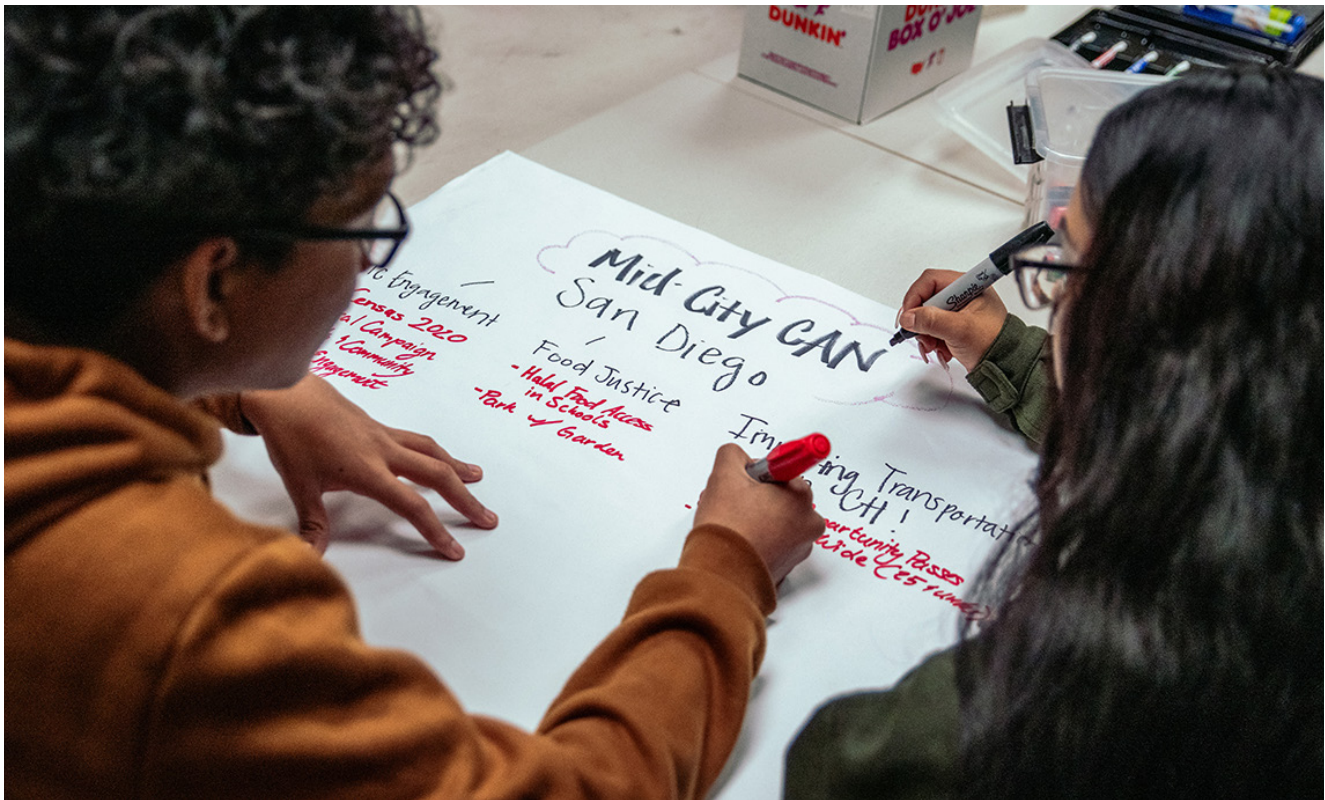
Political education. We know things don’t work, but if you don’t know where to go with your solutions or how to implement them, you’re not doing anything. I learned to be a more effective organizer.

When I realized some of the things I go through, it’s not my fault. Realizing that my parents never got the opportunity to heal. I thank PYJI for that.

My time with PYJI has been a rewarding experience. From meeting new people to developing closer relationships, I feel like my voice and input is valued.

How we can solve problems in our community.

How to network and facilitate in spaces that I never thought I would be so confident in doing.



Opportunities for Change

Related to young people's engagement in PYJI, the most frequently mentioned area for change falls under the general umbrella of providing and improving organizing spaces to better support system-impacted youth. All three youth organizers interviewed stated they would like to provide youth participants with more compensation, preferably in the form of a wage. "Often they are paying the bills at their house," said one organizer. These interview responses are supported by data from the youth survey; about half (55%) of respondents reported they had to choose between doing PYJI work (for a stipend or as a volunteer) or doing a job where they get paid a salary.

In addition to financial considerations, several partners discussed opportunities to further support participation of youth, particularly system-impacted youth, in PYJI. This includes meeting basic needs (e.g., food, housing) before engaging youth in

advocacy and providing healing opportunities to address young people's trauma.

Partners expressed that system involvement imposes restrictions that may limit young people's full or sustained participation in PYJI. Youth who are on probation may not be able to travel to convenings and other events outside of their county; they may also return to the justice system, curtailing their PYJI involvement during that time. One youth organizer noted that in some cases, community-based programming may seem similar to meeting with a probation officer (such as meeting in an office and bringing specified documents), which could discourage participation by youth with system involvement.

When asked what they would change about their PYJI experience, more than half (61%) of youth survey respondents replied that no changes were needed. Of youth who described specific changes they would like to see, the most frequently

mentioned area was to provide more or different opportunities for youth participants, including volunteer opportunities, small-group conversations, and youth-led experiences.

Connecting the Organizers

Throughout the initiative, PYJI partners relished opportunities to share space with one another to engage in networking, relationship building, peer-to-peer learning, healing, and strategy design. Nearly all PYJI partners identified building connections and relationships with other PYJI partners as one of the most valuable and impactful aspects of PYJI. The initiative's deliberate focus on creating space to build connections within the PYJI network has helped bolster the statewide movement around youth justice organizing and advocacy. Through experiences such as learning community events hosted by The Center, peer-to-peer learning exchanges facilitated between two or more PYJI partners, and the PYJI Youth Organizer Leadership Program, PYJI partners described having opportunities to learn from one another as both helpful and critical to building their collective capacity to organize for youth justice system transformation. As one partner said in summary, "It's the best part of PYJI."

Learning Communities Provide Cross-Site Sharing Opportunities

PYJI's learning community events provided the space to foster relationship building, share best practices, and engage in other peer-to-peer learning among PYJI partner organizations and their coalition members. Partners said that learning about best practices in organizing and local efforts led by other partners was useful. "The network building has been a plus—being part of the space to understand the youth justice world and how to best support our young folks including needs emerging and some policy work or campaigns we can take on," said one site director.

The learning communities also provided forums for younger leaders to develop critical skills and build leadership capacity. PYJI youth organizers reflected on how they learned to structure and facilitate power mapping and peer-learning exercises and how to lead relationship-building activities and focus groups through these convenings. While in-person gatherings were halted in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, PYJI partners expressed interest in learning how to sustain these relationships and develop more virtual peer-learning opportunities.





Peer Learning and Expanded Partnerships Help Shape Local and Regional Efforts

PYJI partners actively embraced peer learning throughout the initiative, with most reporting expanded partnerships within the statewide PYJI network. These partnerships played a role in informing and energizing partners' local and regional work.

Multiple partners reported learning how to apply De-Bug's participatory defense model to their local contexts and needs. De-Bug partnered with most other funded partners to help them include participatory defense in their work; some of these organizations are now participatory defense hubs. In some funded counties, De-Bug provided support on individual cases. Building on training from De-Bug, Resilience OC implemented several successful participatory defense efforts in the county, including diverting young people both from juvenile hall and adult court transfers.

In some cases, peer learning and sharing was focused by region. In the San Francisco Bay Area, RYSE and YWFC collaborated to explore steps that could end incarceration for young women in Contra Costa County; RYSE and YWFC also

discussed options for jointly conducting youth participatory action research and sister circles. CURYJ and its coalition member Urban Peace Movement worked alongside YWFC to strategize against the building of a new juvenile facility in Alameda County. At the time of this report, the coalition succeeded in defeating the county's efforts to allocate \$75 million to build the facility and is strategizing about how those funds could be reinvested in community alternatives. Reporting on the outcome of this shared effort, CURYJ said, "This collaboration has been instrumental in helping us strengthen relationships and solidarity between our youth leaders and made more opportunities to share skills and narratives."

Also in the Bay Area, De-Bug reported that PYJI helped "set the stage" to collaborate with YWFC on a multiyear project funded by the Board of State and Community Corrections to support youth development for young people who have come into contact with the juvenile justice system.

In Southern California, PYJI partner organizations and coalition members—including Mid-City CAN (San Diego), Resilience OC, and Sigma Beta Xi—met to discuss developing a collaborative regional

campaign around the collection of juvenile fees and fines in these counties.⁸ “This [peer learning] experience was useful to recognize the political challenges that we share in our regions to begin engagement around youth justice,” reported one participant. “We also saw that while we are all at the beginning stages of this work in our counties, it still looks different for all of us.”

Also in Southern California, Orange County worked regularly with YJC in Los Angeles to learn from YJC’s Free LA campaign, push for broader police accountability, and use YJC’s experience and support to better understand how to support community liberation.

Peer Learning for Youth Organizers

PYJI provided various opportunities, such as site visits between partners and the Youth Organizer Leadership Program, to intentionally bring together youth organizers for learning and relationship building.

“[Young people] walk away with friends and allies in the movement that act as an additional support system for them. It gives them a familiar face to look to when we go to PYJI convenings and when we enter a collective space outside of PYJI.”

FFSJ hosted two site visits with Resilience OC to support youth leaders in building community with each other. FFSJ described these peer experiences as powerful for young people, stating, “They walk



⁸ While SB 190 ended the collection of new juvenile system fees and fines as of January 1, 2018, some counties continued to collect fees and fines that were assessed before the law was implemented. Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties ended this practice in 2020. Western Center on Law and Poverty, National Center for Youth Law, & Policy Advocacy Clinic. (2020). *Orange County ends racially discriminatory wealth extraction from thousands of families amid COVID-19 crisis*. <https://www.law.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Orange-County-Juvenile-Fee-Discharge-2020.07.14-Press-Release.pdf>

away with friends and allies in the movement that act as an additional support system for them. It gives them a familiar face to look to when we go to PYJI convenings and when we enter a collective space outside of PYJI.”

The Youth Organizer Leadership Program helped facilitate a youth network within PYJI that allowed youth leaders across the state to build relationships and strategize with each other. Program activities included regional retreats for participants organized by PYJI partners including youth leaders. Reflecting on what they found most memorable from a program retreat, youth leaders described learning about the participatory defense model from De-Bug, as well as experiencing healing rituals like sweat lodges led by Fresno Barrios Unidos. They left these gatherings feeling better equipped to return home and continue their organizing efforts with new skills and a stronger network.

Opportunities for Change

Related to collaboration among PYJI partners, the most frequently voiced area that may benefit from change deals with youth engagement and learning in shared settings. A few partners, including youth organizers, described opportunities to enhance the PYJI learning communities or other convenings to facilitate increased engagement by young people. Suggestions included involving more youth in these events, being mindful of circumstances that may limit young people’s participation (e.g., being on electronic monitoring or attending school during the time of convenings), and having more breakout sessions for youth to learn and be in community with each other.

Other opportunities related to youth engagement include having “youth only” monthly calls, which could help youth leaders sustain their relationships and share experiences and organizing strategies, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. With

youth engagement being more challenging via online platforms, PYJI partners may benefit from being incentivized to develop new models and strategies to engage youth in interactive yet physically distant ways.

Organizing for Policy Wins

PYJI partners and their coalition members made substantial contributions to reforming local policies related to transforming the youth justice system. Areas that partners focused on as core issues for local reform included improving school climate, reducing or eliminating on-campus law enforcement, ending the use of voluntary or informal probation, reframing law enforcement’s perception of young people, diverting youth from justice system involvement, and ending youth incarceration in their counties. Partners also helped inform California state legislation impacting various aspects of a healthy youth justice system.

Improving School Climate

A few PYJI partners and their coalition members focused on improving school climate as a key area for reform. In 2017, RYSE in Contra Costa County and Mid-City CAN in San Diego County were instrumental in gaining their school boards’ approval of positive school climate resolutions.^{9, 10} These resolutions prioritized the use of restorative justice and other alternative practices over punitive discipline approaches, such as suspensions and arrests. In both counties, PYJI partners mobilized community members to conduct research, engage students and school district leadership, and make public comments at school board meetings in support of these districtwide resolutions. After these resolutions passed, RYSE and Mid-City CAN advocated locally for implementation of specific goals outlined in the resolution and developed strategies for overcoming potential barriers to implementation.

⁹ West Contra Costa Unified School District. (2017, November). Resolution 49-1718, *establishment of a positive school climate policy*. <https://www.wccusd.net/Page/10830>

¹⁰ Medina, E. O. (2017, July 31). *School district adopts school climate bill of rights*. Mid-City Community Advocacy Network. https://www.midcitycan.org/school_district_adopts_school_climate_bill_of_rights

Reinvesting Funds for School-Based Law Enforcement Into Student Supports

Several PYJI partners prioritized reducing or eliminating on-campus law enforcement (also known as school resource officers, or SROs) in order to decriminalize youthful behaviors and reinvest funds in supports such as counselors or restorative practices. At least one of these campaigns has successfully concluded, and others are still underway.

Sacramento ACT conducted a successful campaign to end Sacramento City Unified School District's contract with the city's police department, leading to the removal of SROs from school campuses. Sacramento ACT members, including students and their families, shared their stories at board of education meetings and conducted research meetings with board members during this advocacy effort. Subsequently, young people from Sacramento ACT, along with other community members and district personnel, participated in a hiring panel for the district's director of school safety. In what Sacramento ACT called "a victory

for youth," the district hired a school safety director who, through his previous work in the probation department, "has a proven track record of supporting young people and taking different steps to divert youth from the juvenile justice system," according to Sacramento ACT.

Fresno Barrios Unidos took steps toward removing law enforcement from local schools. Fresno Barrios Unidos youth participated in a National Week of Action Against School Pushout, a Dignity in Schools campaign that called for investing in counselors instead of law enforcement on school campuses. Youth also created local budget demands designed to fund healing-centered interventions in schools and the community rather than police interventions. In addition, Fresno Barrios Unidos established the Fresno Educational Justice Coalition, whose goals include reducing and eliminating SROs on school grounds.

Sigma Beta Xi partnered with the Riverside County Alliance for Boys and Men of Color in an organizing effort to remove law enforcement from the Moreno Valley Unified School District. During the district's



school board meetings, youth leaders from Sigma Beta Xi provided public comment about their treatment at school and the need for social and emotional support, and they developed a youth-led petition seeking the removal of school-based law enforcement.

Youth leaders from FFSJ attended multiple Stockton Unified School District board meetings to advocate for implementing on-campus healing resources and staff, such as a restorative justice coordinator, and ending the hiring of school-based police officers. As part of these efforts, FFSJ reported that youth successfully opposed a proposal by the district's police department to hire a community service officer.

Ending Voluntary and Informal Probation

Policy and organizing work led by YJC in Los Angeles—in partnership with Children's Defense Fund–California, Urban Peace Institute, and Anti-Recidivism Coalition—sought to transform the county's probation programs, budget, and conditions of confinement. This included a focus on the Los Angeles County Probation Department's voluntary probation program. Under this practice, thousands of young people ages 10 to 17, most of whom are youth of color, reported to probation officers and/or the district attorney despite not being court involved. Working together as the Youth Uprising Coalition, YJC and its partners conducted advocacy activities that contributed to the probation department ending this practice in 2018.

Sigma Beta Xi wanted to end the use of informal probation in Riverside County schools. The organization worked with the ACLU to file a class action lawsuit against the Riverside County Probation Department for its Youth Accountability Team (YAT), alleging that the program ensnares

young people who are not court involved in the juvenile justice system for reasons such as tardiness and academic performance. Black and Latinx youth are disproportionately represented in youth placed on informal probation through YAT.¹¹ This lawsuit led to a key organizing victory for Sigma Beta Xi. Under the terms of a settlement agreement announced in 2019, youth will no longer be enrolled in YAT for non-criminal behavior, and youth referred to Riverside County diversion programs such as YAT will receive due process protections, including the appointment of a defense lawyer.¹²

Reframing Law Enforcement's Perceptions of Youth

De-Bug, in collaboration with YWFC and other community partners, engaged young people in a campaign to dismantle the mayor's Gang Task Force in San Jose. Task force membership includes law enforcement and community-based organizations that provide youth services. The campaign is designed to shift law enforcement's narrative about gang membership, including the labeling of youth as gang-involved if they participate in community-based programming in a so-called "gang hotspot" (as identified by police) and subsequently have contact with the youth or adult justice system.

To counter this characterization, De-Bug mobilized youth and community members to attend a task force meeting and engaged youth in creating art to share stories of their neighborhoods that were designated as hotspots. The campaign also hosted a community forum that included participation by young people who have had personal experience with the Gang Task Force. De-Bug reported that this event was a powerful forum and led to the task force agreeing to meet with them.

¹¹ *Sigma Beta Xi v. County of Riverside* (2018) (Case 5:18-cv-01399, https://www.aclusocal.org/sites/default/files/aclu_socal_yat_20180701_complaint.pdf)

¹² ACLU Southern California. (2019). *Historic settlement over abuses of Riverside County youth probation program*. <https://www.aclusocal.org/en/press-releases/historic-settlement-over-abuses-riverside-county-youth-probation-program>



Diverting Youth From Arrest and Adjudication

Through advocacy, organizing, and youth and family mobilization, Youth Uprising Coalition members, including system-impacted youth from YJC, contributed to the creation of a countywide pre-arrest diversion model in Los Angeles, and it was approved by the County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors in late 2017. This model included the creation of the Office of Youth Diversion and Development as part of the county's Department of Health Services. An estimated 12,000 youth are expected to be diverted annually from arrest and booking. After this approval, YJC engaged in implementation of the model, including negotiating with the county and law enforcement to create policies and procedures for diversion, data collection, and data sharing.

In 2019, RYSE entered a partnership with the Contra Costa County District Attorney's Office and Impact Justice to provide a post-arrest, pre-charge

restorative justice diversion program under which youth arrested for a felony or serious misdemeanor will be diverted instead of processed through the youth justice system. RYSE will operate the program independent of any law enforcement or systems partner.

Organizing to End Youth Incarceration

Youth fellows from CURYJ, in partnership with coalition member Urban Peace Movement, developed and implemented a campaign to stop the expansion of Camp Sweeney, a minimum-security juvenile detention facility in Alameda County. The expansion would have doubled the number of beds in the facility. Fellows conducted research with other youth to learn about their experiences of being detained in Camp Sweeney, participated in coalition meetings for the campaign, and planned a community town hall. In August 2020, the Alameda County Probation Department announced plans to halt the camp's expansion.

YWFC engaged in a long-term organizing campaign to permanently close San Francisco County's juvenile hall. YWFC convened the San Francisco Reimagine Justice coalition to develop a community-centered vision of alternatives to youth incarceration, trained youth with system involvement in community organizing, testified at hearings about juvenile probation, and conducted a large-scale participatory action research project on the criminalization of young women in San Francisco.¹³ YWFC reported that during PYJI's support, the conversation about transforming the county's juvenile justice system "emerged from the sidelines to front and center." This work experienced a huge victory in June 2019 when the City and County of San Francisco Board of Supervisors voted to close the county's juvenile hall by the end of 2021.¹⁴

Uplifting Youth and Community Voice in Decision-Making Roles

While the organizing and advocacy efforts supported by PYJI have led to multiple victories, one accomplishment that reaches across the initiative is the recognition of PYJI participants as community leaders. During the grant period, PYJI partners and their coalition members, including youth, in several counties gained or held seats at numerous policymaking tables that impact decision making related to juvenile justice or education. These included the following.

- Contra Costa Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council
- Juvenile Justice Reform Blue Ribbon Panel (San Francisco)
- Los Angeles County Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council
- Orange County Juvenile Justice Commission

- Racial Justice Oversight Body (Contra Costa County)
- Reducing Racial and Ethnic Disparities Executive Steering Committee (San Joaquin County)
- Reentry Council of the City and County of San Francisco
- Santa Ana Unified School District School Climate Committee (Orange County)
- West Contra Costa Unified School District Local Control Accountability Plan Community Committee

Note: These seats may not all be filled by PYJI staff or youth at the time of this report's publication.

Informing State Legislation

In addition to impacting local policy, PYJI partners and their local coalitions provided their research and testimony to inform California state legislation impacting crucial areas of a healthy youth justice system, including the age for juvenile court jurisdiction, sentencing guidelines, and increased transparency by law enforcement. Through meeting with elected officials, attending hearings in Sacramento, making phone calls, writing letters, and creating media pieces reflecting personal experience, PYJI youth, families, and other community members supported numerous progressive youth justice advocacy and educational campaigns at the state level. These include SB 439 (setting a minimum age for juvenile court prosecution), SB 395 (Miranda rights for youth), SB 394 (ending life without parole for youth), AB 1308 (extending youth offender parole hearings to age 25), SB 840 (Youth Reinvestment Grant Program), and AB 392 (California Act to Save Lives).

¹³ Melendrez, A., & Young Women's Freedom Center. (2019). *A radical model for decriminalization: Research model and initial findings*. <https://www.courts.ca.gov/documents/BTB25-4C-01.pdf>

¹⁴ Tucker, J., & Palomino, J. (2019, June 4). In historic move, SF Supervisors vote to close juvenile hall by end of 2021. *San Francisco Chronicle*. www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/Closure-of-SF-s-juvenile-hall-less-than-one-13936500.php

Changes in the Advocacy Landscape and Community Power

Several partners reported observing noticeable shifts in their county's local advocacy landscape and/or in community power to advocate for a healthy justice system since the start of their PYJI grants.

"Now We Are Being Engaged as Part of the Solution"

In Contra Costa County, RYSE reported that the launch of a restorative justice diversion pilot program, which grew out of several years of coalition building among organizations and advocacy by young people, represents a significant change for the county. When it was adopted by the county, it was the first diversion program implemented by the district attorney's office, and Contra Costa became the fourth county in California to implement restorative justice diversion for youth.¹⁵

In Alameda County, CURYJ described seeing an emerging openness for stakeholders to have conversations "about imagining a world without prisons." CURYJ reported, "In just a few years, this shift indicates that the cultural strategy campaigns to shift narratives, to humanize incarcerated people, and to provide platforms for systems-impacted communities is proving to be effective in not only shifting public opinion about jails but in also pushing entire communities to close jails."

FFSJ and De-Bug described actively engaging with their local system partners to propose restorative practices and community-based approaches. In San Joaquin County, FFSJ worked with the district attorney's office to lead restorative justice conferencing. Additionally, after years of advocacy to bring restorative justice practices into the

"The cultural strategy campaigns to shift narratives, to humanize incarcerated people, and to provide platforms for systems-impacted communities is proving to be effective in not only shifting public opinion about jails but in also pushing entire communities to close jails."

local schools, FFSJ's Stockton Trauma Recovery Center launched its "Healing School" model with the Stockton Unified School District to provide students and parents with counseling services and facilitate healing through culture based on the National Compadres Network's La Cultura Cura approach. "Whereas before we were pushing onto systems, now we are being engaged as part of the solution," stated FFSJ about the shifts it has witnessed. In Santa Clara County, De-Bug is in discussions with the probation department to design a community release project for young people at their first detention hearing in juvenile court. This project would expand on a community release project that De-Bug implemented for adults facing charges. "Our position to be able to meet with Probation and propose a youth community release project as an alternative to electronic monitoring speaks to the power we've built since the beginning of the grant," De-Bug noted.

¹⁵ Impact Justice. (2019). *Contra Costa County becomes 4th county in California to adopt restorative justice diversion for youth*. <https://impactjustice.org/contra-costa-becomes-4th-county-in-california-to-adopt-restorative-justice-diversion-for-youth/>

Accelerating a Statewide Movement

Several partners expressed that not only has PYJI positively impacted their local advocacy environments, it has also accelerated a statewide movement for transforming the youth justice system. Partners said that PYJI's contribution to the statewide movement includes funding grassroots groups, changing the system's perspective around alternatives to incarceration, and facilitating a shift in how the narrative for system-impacted individuals is defined.

A few partners noted that PYJI has elevated their work at the local, state, and/or national level. One partner stated that the coalition building and continued organizing capacity provided by PYJI allowed them to step into a leadership role in bringing a systems-change project to their county. Another said that PYJI support has given their organization a national presence.

"Youth shouldn't be just valued for their stories. Their stories should lead to solutions."

Challenges to Shifting the Advocacy Landscape and Building Community Power

While PYJI partners and their local coalitions made notable progress on their organizing priorities during the grant period, a few partners described various challenges in reforming or changing the local advocacy environment. Challenges included the relatively slow pace at which some systems move, such as the time elapsed from approving a policy or practice to actual implementation of the policy or practice. In addition, a county's elected entities or the overall political climate may not support policy changes that would help transform

the youth justice system. In these cases, PYJI partners employed strategies such as adopting new tactics or shifting their focus. For example, when scheduling meetings with school representatives during the week proved challenging, one partner explored offering meetings during the weekend.

Lessons Learned About Organizing for a Healthy Justice System

In individual interviews, PYJI partners described the lessons learned (if any) related to increasing organizational capacity for juvenile justice organizing and advocacy. In progress reports, partners shared their major reflections and learning from their agency and partners' involvement in PYJI. Several key themes emerged from these data sources.

Most-Impacted People Must Lead the Movement

Several partners expressed that the movement to transform the youth justice system must be led by people who are most impacted by the system. In particular, partners described how centering the voices of young people is critical to shaping and driving reform work. "Youth shouldn't be just valued for their stories. Their stories should lead to solutions," one partner said in an interview. "We are consciously building a local network centering youth voice and those most impacted by racist policies which have led to the mass incarceration of our BIPOC gente," another partner wrote in their progress report.

Addressing Young People's Needs Is a Critical Part of Organizing

Several partners described the need to appropriately address young people's immediate needs before asking them to participate in organizing and advocacy work. Unless young

people's basic needs are met, sustained participation in PYJI work will likely not occur. In addition to helping young people meet their basic needs, programs also should provide or connect youth with holistic, tailored supports that assist them in coping with trauma. "We have learned that there has to be a level of healing after incarceration before an individual can take on organizing work, and even then, they will need a lot of support," one partner wrote in a progress report. "Organizing constantly asks the organizer to share their own story and pain, and this becomes overwhelming if the pain has not been healed."

PYJI's Collaborative Approach Informs Local and Statewide Work

Several partners reflected on the value of the initiative to provide a space to connect with, learn about and from, and work collaboratively with organizations across the state. Partners agreed that PYJI's approach of supporting local organizations to pursue issues affecting their individual counties—as well as bringing partners together in a statewide collaborative with regular convenings—has been impactful in promoting a healthy youth justice system. "We believe the statewide approach and bringing together our different counties has truly been critical in pushing us to achieve our goals," one partner wrote in a progress report. "The regular gatherings help serve as a sharing, learning, and accountability space."

Emerging Issues and Future Directions for Youth Justice Organizing

At the time of this report, a few issues related to transforming the youth justice system have come to the forefront.

Closure of Division of Juvenile Justice

PYJI partners participated in a community-led coalition of advocates and organizers focused on closing the state's youth prison system, the Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). In September 2020, the coalition successfully organized its demands and advocated for SB 823 to be passed and sent to Governor Gavin Newsom for consideration. The governor signed SB 823 into law on September 30, 2020.¹⁶

"We have learned that there has to be a level of healing after incarceration before an individual can take on organizing work, and even then, they will need a lot of support."

The law will create meaningful state oversight of a realigned youth justice system, invest in healing-centered, evidence-based, and youth development-focused approaches for high-needs youth, and help prevent the transfer of youth to adult prisons, a majority of whom are Black youth and youth of color. The law provides state support for successful implementation and full funding to counties to increase their local capacity to serve realigned youth at all levels of need.¹⁷

The work to "close DJJ the right way" represents years of collective advocacy and organizing for the transformation of youth justice in California. PYJI partners worked with other organizers and

¹⁶ SB-823 Juvenile justice realignment: Office of Youth and Community Restoration (2019–20). http://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200SB823

¹⁷ PR Newswire, September 4, 2020. *California youth justice advocates applaud historic step towards ending youth incarceration.* <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/california-youth-justice-advocates-applaud-historic-step-towards-ending-youth-incarceration-301124690.html>

What Sets PYJI Support Apart From Other Types of Funding?

In interviews, PYJI partners described what distinguishes PYJI support from other sources of funding that their organization receives. Three key areas emerged from partners' interview responses.

- The opportunity to connect and strategize with other organizations doing similar work, both in partners' own communities and statewide. This includes attending PYJI convenings and participating in peer-to-peer learning exchanges.
- The focus on involving and centering people with lived experience in the work. "PYJI understands that we can't be barriers to our own liberation," stated one partner. "The people that need us most can't be screened out of opportunity."
- The flexible nature of the support, allowing organizations to prioritize youth justice issues that directly impact their local communities as well as making it easier to hire individuals who have been involved in the criminal justice system. "The funding is more holistic and less transactional than other funding for criminal and legal systems work, which focuses on risk and reentry," said one partner.

advocates throughout the state to use their expertise and influence to advance this important legislation.

Response to COVID-19

While much of the PYJI evaluation period occurred prior to COVID-19, the pandemic had deeply felt impacts across the field. Beginning in March 2020, the field moved quickly to call for the release of young people who were at risk of contracting the coronavirus due to being incarcerated. PYJI partners, including YJC and YWFC, coordinated letter writing campaigns to elected officials seeking the release of young people in custody.^{18,19}

In addition to local efforts, the statewide Release and Reconnect Campaign brought together dozens of CBOs, including PYJI partners, to present several recommendations to the governor, State Assembly, and State Senate advocating for protections of system-involved youth and their families during the pandemic.²⁰

Reflections on the Future of Youth Justice Organizing and Advocacy

In interviews, partners described how they see youth justice organizing and advocacy evolving in the next five years.

¹⁸ Youth Justice Coalition. (2020, March 16). Letter to lawmakers and other officials. National Juvenile Justice Network. https://www.njjn.org/uploads/digital-library/COVID-19%20Resource_YouthJusticeCoalitionLetter.pdf

¹⁹ Young Women's Freedom Center. (2020, March 30). Letter to lawmakers. https://www.youngwomenfree.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/YWFC_COVID-19-Response-Demand-Letter_Final1.pdf

²⁰ National Center for Youth Law. (2020, April 10). *Recommendations for urgent action to protect system-involved youth & their families during the COVID-19 pandemic*. <https://youthlaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Recommendations-for-Urgent-Action-to-Protect-System-Involved-Youth-Their-Families-During-the-COVID-19-Pandemic.pdf>

Echoing a theme heard in lessons learned, a few partners emphasized that investments should continue to be made in the people who are closest to the issues being addressed. In addition, a few partners shared the hope of seeing increased development and maintenance of relationships with young people and authentic youth engagement as part of movement building.

A few partners stated that while the movement for organizing for a healthy justice system is gaining momentum, unanswered questions remain. For example, with the statewide closing of youth prisons, how will organizers respond to young people returning to communities? Moreover, what issues should partners prioritize as it relates to aligning with other youth justice coalitions in the state?

A few partners talked about how COVID-19 affected their work. One youth organizer stated

that the pandemic has “changed the landscape” of organizing; as in-person engagement may not be feasible in the near term, organizers may benefit from technical assistance on how to organize and advocate virtually. Partners also discussed the economic impacts of the pandemic. They said that the communities they work with have experienced substantial economic impacts, and economic justice will be more of a priority going forward. “I hope there’s an investment heavily made in communities,” one youth organizer stated. “When we saw people not being able to pay bills, not being able to buy food, they went to food banks and other nonprofits for assistance. Youth organizations were already stretched thin before; now they are completely flooded. I hope that’s a clear wake-up that these organizations aren’t an alternative. They are a necessity.”



Discussion and Recommendations

Discussion

The evaluation sought to identify key themes and trends, successes, challenges, and lessons learned during this phase of PYJI with the goal of developing an understanding of how to effectively support a community-led effort to transform the youth justice system. The evaluation produced several major findings, which are summarized and discussed below.

PYJI helped increase funded partners' organizational capacity for promoting young people's growth, development, and peer learning and connection in the youth justice organizing and advocacy space. PYJI support helped partners intentionally grow and strengthen their youth organizer staffing and programming. This allowed partners to expand their capacity to support young people, many of whom were personally impacted by the juvenile justice system, in skill building, peer collaboration, and advocacy efforts. Through their PYJI engagement, young people gained a voice, increased their skills, and became community leaders. Partners' work with youth highlighted the importance of addressing young people's immediate needs and helping them cope with trauma before asking them to engage in organizing and advocacy.

PYJI provided valuable opportunities for PYJI partners and coalition members to build relationships, network, learn from each other, heal, and design strategy. PYJI's deliberate focus on collaboration and peer learning, which included both formal and informal opportunities, supported partners' local efforts and strengthened

the statewide movement around youth justice organizing and advocacy. Partners described having opportunities to engage in peer relationship building and learning as critical to advancing their collective capacity to organize for youth justice system transformation. This approach also distinguished PYJI funding from other types of funding that partners receive.

PYJI partners and their coalition members made substantial contributions to reforming local policies that bring youth into justice system contact or increase their contact in areas including improving school climate, reducing or eliminating on-campus law enforcement, ending the use of voluntary or informal probation, diverting youth from justice system involvement, and ending youth incarceration in their counties. Partners also helped inform California state legislation that affects various aspects of a healthy youth justice system.

In the context of PYJI's multipronged approach, several partners observed noticeable shifts in their county's local advocacy landscape and/or in their community power to advocate for a healthy justice system since the start of their PYJI grants. These shifts are evident in the implementation of policy changes that provide restorative and trauma-informed alternatives (in areas such as school discipline as well as arrest and incarceration) for young people, the appointment of PYJI partners and their coalition members—including young people—to policymaking tables that impact decision making related to juvenile justice or education, and partners' efforts to form or strengthen local coalitions to drive policy reform

related to youth justice. In addition, these shifts are also seen in the conversations that partners are having with local system partners such as probation, police, and the district attorney to help drive reform.

As the evaluation period wrapped up, PYJI partners' work to transform the youth justice system remains ongoing and, in some cases, may shift in terms of approaches or strategies, to respond to emerging priorities or as a result of the pandemic. Partners' Organizing for a Healthy Justice System grants will continue at least through June 2021 based on the continued availability of funding.

It is clear that the field has changed since PYJI launched in 2012. One of the shifts seen in the initiative itself is in the move from funding public systems to funding CBOs to reform systems. Some partners pointed to this focus—including involving and centering people with lived experience in the work—as an aspect of PYJI funding that sets it apart from other types of support their organizations receive. Another notable change is in how conversations around justice system

change are increasingly being framed, with system-impacted individuals, including youth, often leading these conversations.

Recommendations

The following recommendations for The Center to consider emerged from the evaluation data.

- 1. Continue to support and strengthen young people's PYJI participation.** Several partners and several youth survey respondents recommended increasing the number of youth engaged in PYJI-supported organizing and advocacy. This includes providing resources to pay youth for participating, increasing the number of youth who are involved, and providing tools and resources to connect youth with healing practices and wraparound services to address trauma, assist with reentry, and meet other needs that youth-organizing CBOs may not offer. Other suggestions included providing more or expanded opportunities to develop youth leadership, such as implementing monthly PYJI network



calls specifically for youth, expanding the Youth Organizing Leadership Program to serve more youth, and having more opportunities at the learning communities for youth to learn from and be in community with each other.

2. Continue to sharpen PYJI's statewide focus.

Several partners recommended exploring opportunities to amplify PYJI's statewide momentum, including increasing the focus on connecting local and statewide efforts, increasing opportunities for a collective approach to transforming the youth justice system, developing an initiative-wide position on specific youth justice topics, and developing a branding and marketing angle for the movement that will appeal to youth. There are also opportunities to align more closely with other statewide networks that have similar goals, such as The Alliance for Boys and Men of Color and California Alliance for Youth and Community Justice.

3. Continue to support and expand partnership, relationship building, and shared learning opportunities in the PYJI network. Several partners recommended ways to strengthen the opportunities for connection that are hallmarks of PYJI. This includes finding ways to collaborate in addition to the in-person learning communities; interactive monthly calls and healing circles conducted via videoconferencing may help accomplish this. Other suggestions include continuing to support peer-learning spaces for young people to connect and continuing to offer consulting between partners and The Center, which allows for strategizing and regular communication.

4. Continue to fund movement work led by the people who are most impacted. A few partners emphasized the need to invest in communities and prioritize providing

resources for the organizations and coalitions that lead direct action and are closest to the work. Strategies include limiting restricted funding and making all funding available for general operations; this recommendation is particularly salient in the context of COVID-19, as youth justice organizations work to help young people meet their immediate needs while continuing to develop an organizing space, and this could also apply post-pandemic. Another recommendation is to provide resources to fund capital such as land, building, and property improvements.

5. Organize other funders and continue to encourage them to shift their support to community organizing and advocacy. As described in previous NCCD reports about PYJI, several partners described a need for more funders to shift their approach to funding community organizing and advocacy. While partners acknowledge the leadership of Sierra Health Foundation and other foundations that have supported PYJI in this arena, they also see further opportunity for the foundation to influence the broader ecosystem around community organizing, base building, and advocacy work. One way for Sierra Health Foundation to potentially use its influence could be for the foundation and other funders that support PYJI to publish or discuss, from their perspective, their return on investment and lessons learned from supporting CBOs and their local coalitions during this phase of PYJI compared with the previous phases of PYJI that funded systems to reform and improve themselves. This discussion, which could take various forms such as a written report and/or a webcast, could build upon and respond to the 2018 publication that describes lessons learned from the first two phases of PYJI.²¹

²¹ 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

Appendix: Phases of PYJI

PYJI has been funded for three phases of activity to date. Under Phases 1 and 2, county agencies received funding to plan and lead youth justice system reform. Phase 3 funded community-based organizations to drive system transformation. Descriptions of each phase follow.

Phases 1 and 2

PYJI launched in 2012. In Phase 1 of the initiative, lead agencies in six California counties—Alameda, Sacramento, San Diego, San Joaquin, Solano, and Yolo—received 12-month planning grants to develop plans for system reform with a focus on crossover youth (i.e., youth who are involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems). All lead agencies were the county probation agency except in Solano County, where the lead agency was the Vallejo City Unified School District. In 2013, lead agencies in four of these counties—Alameda, San Diego, San Joaquin, and Solano—received two-year implementation grants to put their local plans into practice.²²

During Phase 2, which began in 2016, San Joaquin and Solano counties received two more years of funding to update and implement their

reform plans to include all probation-involved youth and to strengthen partnerships with other organizations and systems that serve youth, such as law enforcement, schools, youth advocates, and courts.²³

Phase 3: Organizing for a Healthy Justice System

Drawing on lessons learned from PYJI's first two phases of funding systems partners, including the inherent challenges of shifting organizational culture and "achieving systems change from within," Sierra Health Foundation and its philanthropic partners changed course in their funding approach while maintaining the initiative's goal to transform the juvenile justice system.²⁴ Phase 3, named Organizing for a Healthy Justice System, launched in early 2017 and provides support for 11 community-based organizations to work collaboratively with local coalitions to accelerate a statewide movement toward a more youth development-focused juvenile justice system. Partners' Phase 3 grants will continue through June 2021 based on the continued availability of funding.

²² 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

²³ Resource Development Associates. (2018).

²⁴ Resource Development Associates. (2018).