



POSITIVE YOUTH  
JUSTICE INITIATIVE BRIEF

ORGANIZING FOR A  
HEALTHY JUSTICE SYSTEM

# COMMUNITY VICTORIES: Summary of Policy Achievements

The Positive Youth Justice Initiative (PYJI) is helping communities across California transform juvenile justice practice and policy into a more just, effective system that is aligned with the developmental needs of young people. In 11 California counties, PYJI supports community-based organizations that are working in partnership with grassroots organizations and youth and family members most impacted by the juvenile justice system. Each coalition has tailored its community organizing and advocacy activities to the policy context in its county. Together, they are accelerating a statewide movement toward a healthy juvenile justice system focused on youth well-being, improved system practices and reduced justice system involvement.

## GEARING UP FOR PROGRESSIVE POLICIES IN CALIFORNIA

Investing in community-based organizations' capacity and leadership development provides a tangible way of building power to influence and change the education and juvenile justice systems. This philanthropic approach is reinforced by recent research suggesting that flexible funding for organizational capacity building is a needed element of social change efforts.<sup>1</sup>

PYJI-funded partners and their local coalitions have drawn on their strengthened alliances and increased organizational capacity to inform and contribute to more progressive juvenile justice policies at the local and state levels. This investment in capacity and leadership development has resulted in youth and family members being equipped with the skills to conduct advocacy efforts such as meeting with elected officials, attending public hearings, making phone calls, writing letters, and sharing personal testimony.

## IMPACTING LOCAL POLICIES

At the local level, PYJI partners and their coalition members are engaged in a range of organizing and advocacy activities to transform the youth justice system. Some highlights of this work, including policy victories and ongoing work, are summarized in this brief.

## DISMANTLING THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

- **RYSE Youth Center and Mid-City Community Advocacy Network** drafted or supported district-wide school climate resolutions that were approved by the school board in their respective counties in 2017. These resolutions prioritize the use of restorative justice and other alternative practices over punitive discipline approaches such as suspensions and arrests.
- **Fresno Barrios Unidos** used social media campaigns to bring awareness to school-based policies that criminalize youth and to encourage investment in school counselors rather than on-campus law enforcement.
- **Sacramento Area Congregations Together** conducted a successful campaign to end Sacramento City Unified School District's contract with the City of Sacramento Police Department for school resource officers (on-campus law enforcement).

## ENDING "VOLUNTARY" PROBATION

- The **Youth Justice Coalition** and its partners conducted advocacy activities that contributed to the Los Angeles County Probation Department ending its use of the Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC 236) for "voluntary probation." Under this practice, thousands of young people ages

10–17, most of whom are youth of color, reported to probation officers and/or the district attorney despite not being court involved. Responding to public pressure, the probation department eliminated this practice in 2018.

- **Sigma Beta Xi, Inc.** initiated a successful class action lawsuit against the Riverside County Probation Department's Youth Accountability Team (YAT). The lawsuit, filed by the ACLU in 2018, alleges that YAT ensnares youth who are not court involved in the juvenile justice system for school-related reasons such as tardiness and academic performance, leading to violations of due process, privacy, and free speech. Black and Latino youth are disproportionately represented among youth placed on "informal" probation through YAT.<sup>2</sup> Sigma Beta Xi achieved a key victory through this lawsuit. Under a settlement agreement announced in July 2019, youth will no longer be enrolled in YAT for non-criminal behavior. In addition, youth referred to Riverside County diversion programs such as YAT will receive due process protections including appointment of a defense lawyer.<sup>3</sup>

## UPLIFTING YOUTH AND COMMUNITY VOICE

- PYJI partners and their coalition members, including youth, gained or held seats at policymaking tables that impact decision making related to juvenile justice or education. These included the following.
  - Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council (Los Angeles County)
  - Juvenile Justice Reform Blue Ribbon Panel (San Francisco County)
  - Orange County Juvenile Justice Commission
  - Reentry Council of the City and County of San Francisco
  - Reducing Racial and Ethnic Disparities Executive Steering Committee (San Joaquin County)
  - Santa Ana Unified School District School Climate Committee (Orange County)



- West Contra Costa Unified School District Local Control Accountability Plan Community Committee
- A committee that provided input on selecting a deputy chief for juvenile probation (Santa Clara County)
- PYJI partners learned how to apply the model of participatory defense to their local contexts and needs. Participatory defense is Silicon Valley De-Bug’s organizing model for families and communities to impact the outcome of cases in the court system and to transform the landscape of power in the criminal justice system. Resilience Orange County implemented several successful participatory defense efforts in the county, including

diverting young people both from juvenile hall and adult court transfers.

## INFORMING STATE LEGISLATION

PYJI partners and their local coalitions provided research and testimony from their personal experience to inform California state legislation impacting crucial areas of a healthy youth justice system. These include the age range for juvenile court jurisdiction, sentencing guidelines, increased transparency by law enforcement, and amplifying employment opportunities for individuals with justice system involvement. All bills in the following table were approved by the governor of California in 2017–2018.

Topic/Category	Legislation	Contribution to a Healthy Justice System
Juvenile Court	SB 439 (Setting a Minimum Age Juvenile Court Prosecution)	Limits juvenile court jurisdiction to youth ages 12–17. Requires counties to develop alternatives for children under age 12.
	SB 1391 (Fitness for Juvenile Court)	Ensures youth under age 16 are not transferred to adult (criminal) court.
Sentencing and Parole	SB 394 (Ending Life Without Parole [LWOP] for Youth)	Provides chance for parole for youth with LWOP cases.
	SB 1393 (Fair and Just Sentencing Reform)	Ends mandatory use of five-year sentence enhancements.
	SB 1437 (Better and Equitable Sentencing Through Thoughtful Practices)	In cases of felony murder, restricts what charges can be brought and provides opportunity for resentencing.
	AB 1308 (Extending Youth Offender Parole Hearings to Age 25)	Increases upper age limit from 22 to 25 for “youth offender parole.” Requires Board of Parole Hearings to consider age at time of offense.
Police Accountability	AB 90 (Gang Database)	Increases transparency and oversight of shared gang databases.
	SB 395 (Miranda Rights for Youth)	Mandates that youth under age 16 must be able to consult with an attorney prior to being questioned by the police.
	SB 1421 (Increased Access Police Records)	Provides public access to police investigations, to findings, and discipline related to use of force, sexual assault against a citizen, and other matters.
	AB 1811 (Emergency Calls to Group Homes)	Protects youth living in group homes from being arrested for non-criminal acts in such facilities.
Reentry	AB 1008 (California Fair Chance Act)	Increases employment opportunities for people with justice system involvement.

## Positive Youth Justice Initiative County Lead Organizations

- Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ) (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)



## EVALUATING PYJI

The National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) is evaluating the current phase of PYJI and has prepared four briefs to highlight findings and learnings on some issues that PYJI partners are addressing. The evaluation draws on multiple sources of quantitative and qualitative information, using existing data from funded partners’ semi-annual progress reports, reviewing other sources, and collecting primary data at scheduled PYJI activities. Through the evaluation, NCCD has produced findings that The Center at Sierra Health Foundation and PYJI’s philanthropic partners can use to support communities in strengthening local infrastructure for organizing and advocacy toward a healthier justice system.

1 Sacks, A., McLeod Grant, H., & Wilkinson, K. (2018). *The new normal: Capacity building during a time of disruption*. Retrieved from Open Impact website: <https://www.openimpact.io/new-normal/>

2 Sigma Beta Xi v. County of Riverside, Case No. 5:18-cv-01399, [https://www.aclusocal.org/sites/default/files/aclu\\_socal\\_yat\\_20180701\\_complaint.pdf](https://www.aclusocal.org/sites/default/files/aclu_socal_yat_20180701_complaint.pdf)

3 ACLU Southern California. (2019, July 24). *Historic settlement over abuses of Riverside County youth probation program* (press release). <https://www.aclusocal.org/en/press-releases/historic-settlement-over-abuses-riverside-county-youth-probation-program>