Please Don't Give Up on Us:

Stories From Children and Youth Incarcerated in California

OYCR

Acknowledgments

This report was commissioned by the California Health & Human Services Agency's Office of Youth and Community Restoration (OYCR) and prepared by The Social Changery with the support and contributions of the OYCR Youth Advisory Board.

The OYCR Youth Advisory Board (YAB) consists of about 20 young people with the lived experience and expertise to help shift the narrative and improve policies and practices that directly affect them and their peers. Their work empowers and fosters the growth of young people by creating a respectful, trustworthy space for engagement and collaboration on key policies and projects. With the YAB, youth are agents of change, leading and guiding California's youth justice reform work alongside OYCR staff and partners.

The ability for young people to courageously share their stories for this work would not have been possible without the expertise and leadership of the organizations and community partners listed below. Their commitment to bettering the lives of youth, families, and communities makes this transformation not only possible, but achievable.

- **Anti-Recidivism Coalition (ARC)**
- **Bay Area Creative (BAC)**
- **California Youth Connection (CYC)**
- **California Alliance for Youth & Community Justice (CAYCJ)**
- **Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ)**
- **Fresh Lifelines for Youth (FLY)**
- **Healing Dialogue and Action**
- **Native Dads Network**
- **Pacific Juvenile Defender Center**
- **Prosecutors Alliance**
- **Project Rebound: Humboldt**
- **Young Women's Freedom Center**

We would also like to acknowledge and thank the individual system champions who contributed to this work, including current and former probation chiefs, probation officers, district attorney staff, and judges.

Letter From Youth Advisory Board

The youth of our state are its greatest assets, yet the justice system they encounter often fails to fully recognize and support their potential. This report represents a collective vision for not just reimagining juvenile justice but recreating one that is rooted in accountability, fairness, and opportunity.

Endorsed by the Youth Advisory Board, this report reflects the voices of young people who have directly experienced the system. Their insights and lived experiences provide a powerful lens for understanding both the challenges and opportunities within our current framework. Their advocacy reminds us that effective reform must be shaped in partnership with those it is meant to serve.

The findings and recommendations outlined here are presented with the goal of building a system where all youth are met with dignity, compassion, and meaningful pathways for growth. From reducing systemic inequities to prioritizing rehabilitation over punishment, this report serves as a call to action for policymakers, practitioners, and community leaders alike.

Together, we can build a justice system that holds youth accountable and invests in their potential — ensuring they have the tools, support, and opportunities to thrive as engaged members of our communities. To stop the continuous retraumatizing and move to healthy, healed and whole communities.

We are grateful our Youth Advisory Board was able to share their leadership and commitment to this work, and we invite all stakeholders to join us in advancing these transformative reforms. We must move beyond a basic reform mindset and start to recreate, rebuild, and reclaim a community of care. We can dismantle the systems of harm that tear down our young people, and create new ones that build them up. We can create safer and more inclusive communities that help today's young people believe in themselves and achieve success.

Join us in lifting up our youth so they can make their own valuable contributions to the world.

Sincerely,

OYCR-Youth Advisory Board

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Executive Summary

"Please Don't Give Up on Us: Stories From Children and Youth Incarcerated in California" is an in-depth exploration of youth justice in California from the perspective of previously and currently court-involved children and youth. Grounded in their lived experience and expertise, this report leverages firsthand accounts, research, and systemic analysis to illustrate the transformative power of a healing-centered approach to youth justice. Through building an understanding of the experiences of children and youth who are court-involved and using evidence-based best practices, we can provide more effective solutions for children and youth, individuals who work within the court system, and the communities we aim to keep safe.

"I know I'm not a bad person — I was a kid trying to survive."

We share a common goal: safe communities where our kids grow up supported and ready to become capable, contributing adults. When we punish young people through incarceration and harsh disciplinary actions, we undermine this goal. Research has shown that rather than preventing or deterring crime, punitive approaches create cycles of disadvantage, increasing risks of future justice involvement.[1]

However, research also points the way to what does work: meaningful accountability, genuine support, and the chance to not let a young person's worst decisions define them for the rest of their lives. Early interventions that keep youth in their community, connected to their families, and provided with opportunities through community services dramatically reduce reoffending.[2] This approach isn't soft on crime; it's smart on prevention.

On June 30, 2023, the state closed its youth prisons, transferred care to local jurisdictions and established the Office of Youth and Community Restoration (OYCR) to guide counties in creating programs rooted in healing, equity, and growth. A key aspect of this work is listening to the voices of young people who have experienced incarceration.

This report highlights the stories* of over 100 individuals who have experienced incarceration as children and youth. Throughout these conversations, youth described acting out of desperation in unsafe environments in search of safety and connection while trying to meet their basic human needs. Their stories also illustrated the transformative impact of opportunities that facilitate healing and growth.

The realignment of California's youth justice system requires collaboration, innovation, and a shared commitment to creating opportunities for growth and accountability. By focusing on healing and second chances, we can break cycles of harm, foster resilience, and build safer communities. With the right tools and support, all young people have the potential to thrive.

**In the pages that follow, excerpts of these stories are shared in the words of the young people and others we interviewed. Some identifying information has been removed and names have been changed so as not to reveal their identities.*

Part 1: Understanding

Many young people interviewed for this report came into contact with the justice system as young as 12 to 15 years old, navigating challenging environments with minimal support. Their stories reveal the profound influence of trauma and adversity, emphasizing that many were simply trying to survive rather than intending harm. One youth shared, "I had to work at a super young age to make a living for my siblings and take care of them, and people aren't looking at that... without any guidance or help I just had to make the decision I thought was best to take care of my brothers."

Adolescence is a period of impulsivity and risk-taking, a normal phase of development.[3] However, youth from under-resourced communities face compounding challenges due to instability, poverty, and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), such as abuse and neglect. These conditions disrupt healthy development, increasing the likelihood of behaviors misinterpreted as delinquency.[4] One youth reflected, "I was in a toxic and abusive place for years. It rewires your brain."

Despite these hardships, their resilience shines through. Many youths expressed the transformative impact of accountability and support. "When I was younger, I felt like no one cared for me. I thought I had to navigate the world alone," one youth shared.

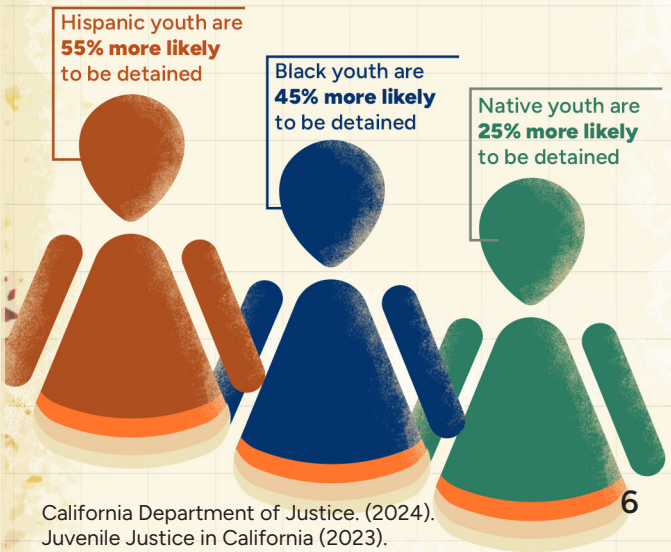
But with mentorship, therapy, and restorative justice programs, they began to heal and thrive. Another said, "I grew up witnessing violence, but I want to break the cycle and be a good parent."

Research underscores the importance of support systems in mitigating the effects of trauma. A single trusted adult can significantly improve outcomes for court-involved youth.[5] One young person described their mentor as a lifeline, saying, "They helped me keep my sanity and gave me a sense of normalcy."

However, systemic inequities persist. Punitive responses often exacerbate harm, while diversion and rehabilitation programs yield far better outcomes. Youth who are diverted from the system or provided with rehabilitative and restorative justice opportunities have fewer future arrests, commit less violence, complete school at higher rates, and have increased economic opportunities compared to youth who are detained.[6]

These young people's stories underscore the need for compassion and tailored interventions. As one youth said, "I'm not worthless. I'm triumphant. If my community believes in me, I can believe in me too." Society can empower these young people to build brighter futures by addressing the root causes of behavior and providing pathways for healing.

Compared with white peers who share similar characteristics and offending histories, youth of color are significantly more likely to be detained.



California Department of Justice. (2024). Juvenile Justice in California (2023).

Part 2: Alternatives

The youth interviewed for this report described lives marked by instability, unmet needs, and a longing for support and belonging. Without these, many sought stability in ways that led to conflict with the law. A punitive system only amplified their feelings of isolation and hopelessness. As one youth explained, "Locking us up... it's not the best thing to do. I had a lot of trauma from being incarcerated, and it impacted my life when I got out."

Research shows that incarceration often exacerbates challenges instead of addressing them.[7] Lengthy detentions disrupt development, strip youth from their communities, and reduce opportunities for positive relationships and skill-building. One youth shared, "The system would rather have you commit another crime and return to prison than help you rehabilitate."

Alternatives such as community-based programs, restorative justice, and diversion offer more effective solutions. These approaches address the underlying causes of behavior, provide healing opportunities, and promote accountability in a way that supports growth. Youth repeatedly emphasized the transformative power of these programs. One remarked, "I felt like no one cared for me until I got connected with someone who listened and helped. That

Restorative justice centers on repairing harm and building relationships rather than punishment. This approach empowers both survivors and offenders to heal. Youth who participated in such programs expressed gratitude for the chance to reflect on their actions and grow. One said, "I realized someone actually cared for me. That support helped remove a lot of barriers."

Diversion programs divert youth away from formal justice systems and toward community support. These initiatives are proven to reduce recidivism and improve life outcomes, from education to employment. A youth noted, "They stripped away everything I knew — in the best way. They gave me healthy habits, great mentors, and a path forward."

Programs rooted in trauma-informed care are critical. Understanding that many youth face adverse experiences — such as abuse, neglect, or community violence — helps shift the focus from punishment to healing. One youth reflected, "You do what you have to do to survive. When circumstances change, people can too. Everyone deserves a second chance."

Less restrictive programming keeps youth connected to families and communities, fostering positive behaviors and addressing root
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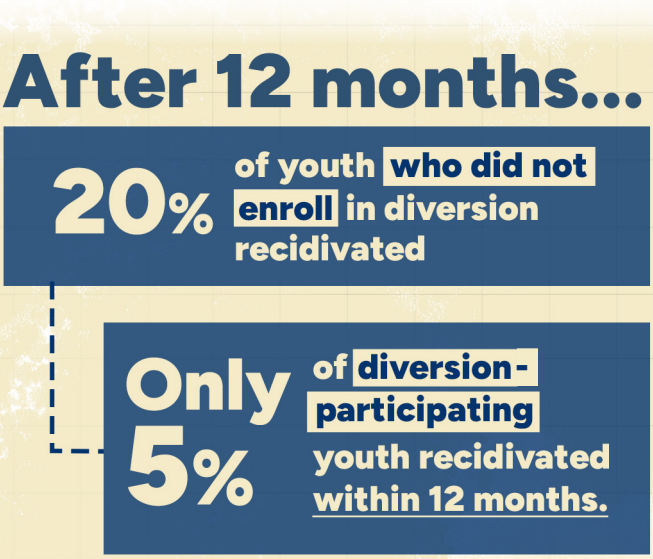


Los Angeles County Office of Youth Development:
The Impact of Youth Diversion in Los Angeles County

Part 3: Opportunities

For many youth, encounters with the justice system mark the first time they were able to access counseling, mentorship, educational support, and other services that could have made a difference years earlier. One youth noted, "A lot of foster youth didn't know about resources because their social workers didn't tell them. Then they became homeless."

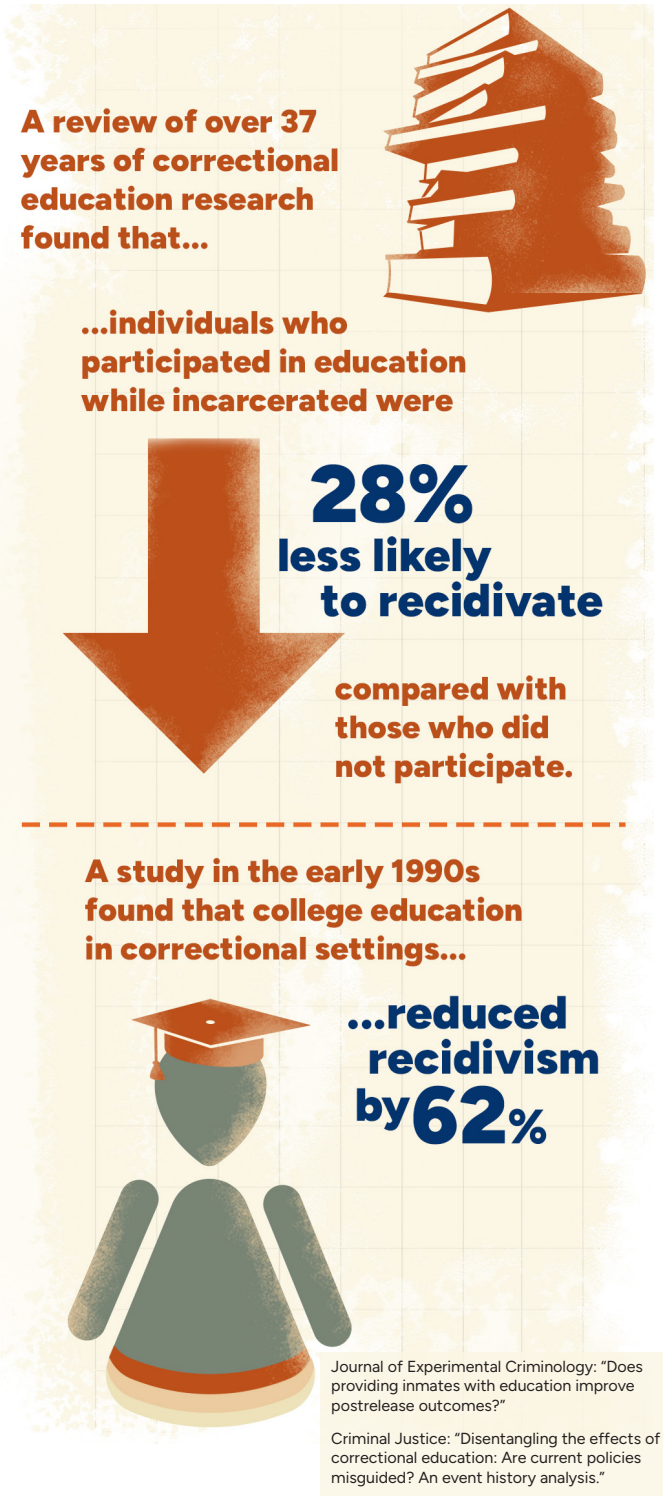
The lack of transparency and equitable access to services creates feelings of powerlessness and alienation. As one youth described, "Being arrested was like being kidnapped. No one explained what was happening to me, and I had no control."

Timely intervention is crucial. Delays in access to behavioral health care, educational programs, or diversion options exacerbate existing challenges. A youth reflected, "Court dates keep getting pushed back. You can't join a program until you're sentenced, but you can't be sentenced without a hearing. It's frustrating."

Engaging youth in decision-making processes has been shown to build trust and improve outcomes. Young people expressed a need to have their voices heard in shaping their futures. One shared, "We want genuine connections, ways to grow, and opportunities to succeed. Having councils and groups that give us purpose is so important."

Providing basic needs is equally essential. Many children and youth described crimes driven by survival. One explained, "Some of us had to steal to have enough clothes in our closet. Instead of funding institutions that keep us locked up, help families prevent this."

These reflections highlight the importance of meeting fundamental needs, like housing, food, and stability, before problems escalate. Programs involving credible messengers — mentors with lived experience in the justice system — stood out as particularly impactful. A youth observed, "Someone who's walked in our shoes understands us in ways others can't. They help us believe change is possible." Credible messengers bridge the gap between system actors and youth, offering relatable guidance and hope for a brighter future.



Journal of Experimental Criminology: "Does providing inmates with education improve postrelease outcomes?"

Criminal Justice: "Disentangling the effects of correctional education: Are current policies misguided? An event history analysis."

Education emerged as a critical factor in rehabilitation. Many youth felt pushed out of school systems due to truancy or disciplinary issues. One shared, "I'd beg bus drivers to let me on, because I couldn't afford the fare. Then I'd be marked truant when it wasn't my fault." For those who reconnected with education, the impact was profound. A youth explained, "College changed my life. I found community, mentors, and a path to a better version of myself."

Behavioral health support is vital, given the high prevalence of trauma among system-involved youth. One participant reflected, "I've seen a lot of death and done stupid things. Therapy helped me forgive myself and start over." Strengths-based approaches that emphasize youth autonomy, resilience, and creativity can foster healing and long-term success.

As one young person put it, "Focus on solutions before there's a problem. Invest in schools and programs to help us before it's too late." By listening to youth, addressing their needs, and providing meaningful opportunities, the system can transform lives and create safer, stronger communities.

Closing

Every time a young person enters the justice system, we face a choice: Will we perpetuate cycles of harm or foster transformation?

These children and youth are not just numbers — they are our neighbors, brimming with potential. Their stories of resilience and survival show us what's possible when we prioritize support, healing, and accountability over punishment.

We know what works. When youth receive the tools to heal from trauma, build skills, and develop meaningful connections, they become mentors, leaders, and contributors to safer communities. Each transformed life breaks generational cycles of harm, creating ripples of positive change.

The question is not whether transformation is possible — it's whether we're willing to act. The laws and policies needed to shift from punishment to healing already exist. **Change begins with the decisions we make today.** It starts with listening to young people and championing their needs. It starts with every effort to advocate for rehabilitation resources, every choice to see their potential instead of their past.

Youth Advisory Board — How to Be an Effective Ally

Build Relationships

- Build meaningful connections with youth.
- Provide access to people that can relate to youth and lead them to success.
- Bridge gaps, provide resources, and create pathways to success.

Practice Radical Accountability

- Be honest and transparent with youth.
- Follow through with promises that are made.
- Hold those in power accountable and offer apologies when necessary.

Elevate the Youth Voice

- Believe that youth are experts in their own experiences.
- Ensure youth voices are present everywhere decisions are being made.
- Teach youth how to use their voice and advocate for their needs.

Introduction

We share a common goal: safe communities where our kids grow up supported and ready to become capable, contributing adults. When we punish children and young people through incarceration and harsh disciplinary actions, we unintentionally undermine this goal.

> **Punitive approaches don't reduce future risks — they increase them by creating a cycle of disadvantage that makes our communities less safe rather than more protected.**

Research has shown that youth who experience justice system involvement face significant risks of educational disruption, reduced employment prospects, and increased likelihood of future criminal justice contact.[1] In the state of California, children as young as 12 can be processed through the juvenile justice system, and even younger for a handful of serious crimes.[9]

> **Research also points the way to what does work: meaningful accountability, genuine support, and the chance to not let a young person's worst decisions define them for the rest of their lives.**

By keeping children and youth who are justice-involved connected to their families and communities, and providing them with the same opportunities as youth who are not justice-involved, we dramatically reduce the chance they'll reoffend.[2] In fact, early interventions that divert children to services with their family in the community — similar to how our own child is treated when they transgress — is the solution in most circumstances. **This approach isn't soft on crime; it's smart on prevention.**

Most children and youth initially interact with the juvenile justice system for low level offenses such as stealing, curfew violations, and drug use.[10] When these cases are diverted to address social emotional needs, young people feel supported, understood, and are given opportunities to grow, they become contributors to community safety — not threats to it. They develop empathy, learn conflict resolution skills, and become invested in the well-being of their neighborhoods.

For this reason California has passed a series of legislative bills to transform the youth justice system to prioritize health, healing, and accountability over punishment. On June 30, 2023, California closed its state-run youth prisons and returned the responsibility for the care of all youth who are court-involved to their local jurisdictions — a move that Governor Gavin Newsom referred to as "the beginning of the end of juvenile imprisonment as we know it."

This historic shift was decades in the making, guided by research and driven by a coalition of experts in juvenile justice and recidivism, families, young people, community advocates, probation departments, and other stakeholders working together to make this new vision of youth justice a reality. As a result, the Office of Youth and Community Restoration (OYCR) was created to guide the transition as counties geared up for youth to return to their communities and to be committed to county, rather than state-run, facilities.

OYCR partners with counties to create positive opportunities for young people in the justice system by supporting the development of programs that recognize young people's potential for growth.

By bringing together the best knowledge and practices from across California, OYCR helps counties build programs that support young people in their journey to success.

We talked with over 100 people who have been through the juvenile justice system, and their stories* paint a powerful picture that most people never see.

These aren't stories of "bad kids" — they're stories of children who made impossible choices in incredibly tough situations. **Their stories aren't a narrative of criminal intent, but of desperately trying to survive;** of trying to meet their basic human needs while finding safety and connection in situations most of us can't even imagine.

Imagine being a child who feels so unsafe, so unsure of whether you will have enough to eat or a safe place to sleep, that stealing food or clothes feels like your only option. A scenario that can make joining a gang feel like a blessing — like your best chance to make it to your 18th birthday. These are the stories we heard, again and again: choosing between terrible options, looking for any sense of belonging and security, trying to make sure you and your siblings make it in a world that seems designed to break you down.

What was remarkable, however, was how often these were stories of children and young people who have not given up despite overwhelming odds, and who are asking for a community and a system that doesn't give up on them.

Despite the challenges experienced by children and youth both outside and inside of the justice system, we discovered a series of bright spots: a single caring adult who showed up, a program that ignited a passion for learning and a future career path, the life-changing experience of receiving supportive behavioral health services for the first time. Taken on their own, these are individual moments that show how the system is working — but when viewed together, a pattern emerges that can guide our efforts.

Through their stories — along with the perspectives of probation officers and probation chiefs, judges, district attorneys, public defenders, and community organizations — we can better understand key issues, promising practices, and what must be considered to ensure that we continue to build a system that keeps our young people and our communities safe.

This report is guided by research and the voices of young people who have experienced incarceration. In Part 1, we will explore the life experiences of these young people, the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences and toxic stress, and the role adolescent brain development plays in youth behavior and capacity for rehabilitation. Part 2 focuses on the positive impact of community-based, healing-centered, and restorative justice practices for youth and victims, along with the effectiveness of public safety efforts. Finally, in Part 3 we will showcase resources and tools you can use to create positive change — according to both research and the youth involved — and the importance of involving youth in decision-making.

The process of realignment is not a simple one. It requires new partnerships, reimagining roles, redesigning facilities, acknowledging, and addressing biases, and shifts in thinking about the purpose of the juvenile justice system. And while many of these changes must occur on a systemic level, everyone plays an important role in making this change a reality.

It isn't just about helping individual young people; it's about creating a cycle of positive connection and mutual support that makes

**In the pages that follow, excerpts of these stories are shared in the words of the young people and others we interviewed. Some identifying information has been removed and names have been changed so as not to reveal their identities.*

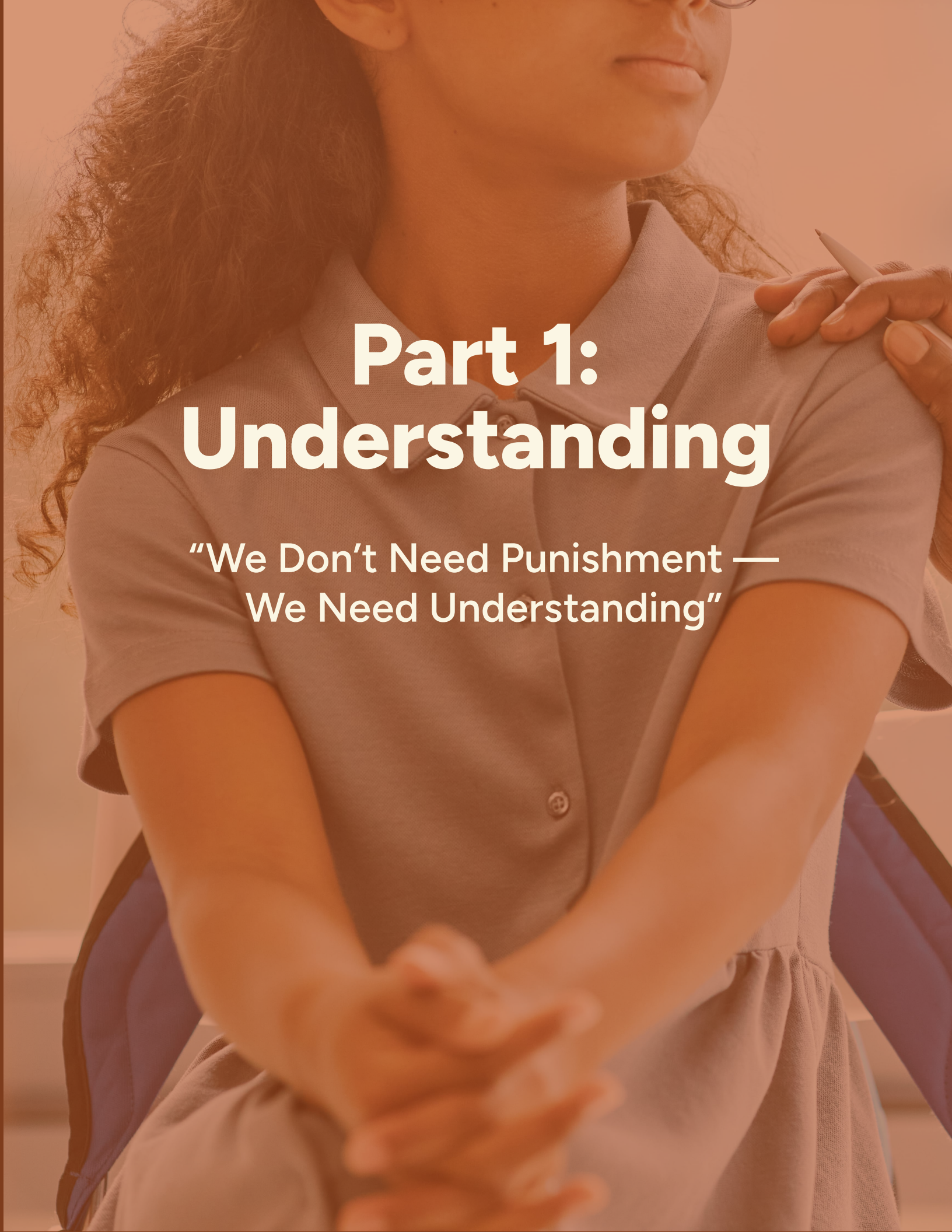
communities stronger, more resilient, and genuinely safer for everyone. **By focusing on healing and growth instead of punishment, we can break cycles of harm and build a future where everyone has a chance to thrive.** Critically, we can do this while still holding young people accountable and respecting our collective responsibility towards those harmed as well as the individual experiences of victims.

As daunting or complex as it may seem, our communities and our youth cannot afford for us to carry on with business as usual. We have learned more in the last 25 years about trauma, adolescent brain development, and the resiliency of humanity than we learned in the prior century. Taking that learning and applying it to this complex social puzzle is reasonable and urgent.

> **Young people in our communities are our future. When they fail to reach their full potential, we all lose.**

The decisions made today about what happens to a child or a youth going through adolescence when they encounter law enforcement and the court system will change the trajectory of their lives. We can decide if that trajectory will be shaped by punitive environments that reinforce negative behaviors and define their potential based on choices made in their worst moments, or if they will be given the tools to reflect, grow, and emerge as healthier, more capable individuals. We can choose to intervene in this manner no matter what the child or youth has done, and no matter where they live — because for any young person, that potential exists.

We can all stand up for giving a child a second chance.



Part 1: Understanding

“We Don’t Need Punishment — We Need Understanding”

Alexis' Story

My grandparents were the ones who raised me. They didn't really understand the American school system, so sometimes they'd pull me out of school to work with them. My grandma always pushed me to do really well in school, though, and up until fifth or sixth grade, I had good grades. But when my grandmother passed away, things really took a turn. ***I lost the one person who made me feel cared for, and without her, I felt lost.***

I remember feeling jealous when other students would get picked up by their parents. It was always my grandfather for me, and I was grateful he was taking care of me, but I just always wanted my mom or dad to come get me or to take me out. ***In my family, if you cried you were weak. I was never allowed to express my emotions.*** My grandfather always told me to defend myself. So when I saw these other kids getting picked up by their parents, I started to pick on them and provoke them and get into fights. It was like fighting became an addiction because it made me feel better, knowing that I made someone else feel bad like I did. I think it's that thing of "hurt people, hurt people."

When I was 13, I got detention for coming to school late, but my grandfather had to take me with him to his dialysis appointment. No one asked me why I wasn't there on time. I got really mad because the principal said he needed to talk to my parents. I was like "You can try, but it doesn't matter. They won't care." After that, he kept telling me that they do care and all this stuff, and it just made me feel bad about it all. It felt like he was kind of rubbing it in like, "Oh, they love you," but that isn't what was happening at home. I was in the office and some girl started laughing at me about it, so I went off on her. The principal got involved, trying to separate us, and I ended up slapping him. That is what got me sent to the hall the first time.

My grandfather was getting really sick, so my parents were having to help him. That was actually when I learned who my parents were. When I was 14, they signed the papers from school so I could start working and made me pay rent money. ***I had to work to make sure there was food for me and my younger siblings. If not, it was literally eat at school or don't eat at all.***

My dad was addicted to cocaine and he was never really himself with me. It was impossible for me to see him without that bag, without powder on his nose, without powder on the table, without him super angry. He would sit there and not talk for hours and then just start cussing at me and telling me how I'm not worthy. One day I just couldn't take it anymore and we ended up getting into a physical fight. Knives were drawn and he was chasing me. Our neighbor at the time called the cops and I remember being scared, but also remembering that my dad was an immigrant, so I was like, "I can't do my dad like that. I can't put him behind bars."

They interviewed us separately in front of the house and he told them that I was crazy, that I needed help, and was just putting all the blame on me. I took it and told them it was me, that he did nothing, and they took me into the hall again. ***I remember on that ride it just hit me different from the first time because this time it was about my parents.*** I just wanted to be loved by them and everyone was telling me that I'm supposed to be loved by them, but it just wasn't happening with me. It was heartbreaking.

This time they had me talk to a counselor. She explained to me what was happening with me, why I was doing the things I was doing, and what it was all rooted in. I remember for the first time, I just started to cry. Even now, I still think about it all the time. ***It was literally the first time I was able to cry in front of somebody and that person listen to me and not tell me that I was crazy,*** not tell me that I was wrong for feeling this way, or try to punish me.

After I got out, I went back to my grandpa. I was able to join a volleyball team as a freshman and I was really good. I made the varsity team and it felt so good. I felt like I had somewhere I belonged. Then some of the older girls, they started to give me a hard time and would provoke me to get into fights.

That's when I really started spiraling. ***I got involved with the wrong crowd who were pushing me to do drugs and ditch, but for the first time, I had a group that understood what I was going through.*** They were these girls and guys who were also hurting, who had no mom or dad, or their grandparents were sick, or they lived with their aunt or uncle.

When I was 15, my parents kicked me out, because I refused to keep giving them money. I really started to steal and I got caught up with these people who sold drugs. I was nervous because I didn't want to hurt anyone, but I didn't know how else to survive. ***I started selling drugs, because I had no other way to provide for my brothers. I did what I had to do to put shoes on their feet and food on the table.***

I got arrested for a robbery and a police chase after someone I was working with snitched on me. I spent eight months in juvenile detention. I met other girls who were going through the same things, but it was real different from the first juvenile hall I went to. It felt like instead of them trying to get to understand us and know what happened that led us to being this way, we were being punished by them and they were just telling us we are bad kids. The whole time I was just worried about my brothers. How were they going to eat? Who was going to protect them from my dad?

I think there is a stigma that kids who get in trouble with the law are bad, when we are just missing that guidance and navigation. I didn't get involved in crime because I wanted to. I did it because I didn't see another way out. ***The people who were supposed to protect me didn't help. Instead of asking why I was acting out, they labeled me a bad kid and pushed me deeper into trouble.*** Instead of trying to help me when I asked, they just pushed me away so I wasn't their problem anymore. We don't need punishment — we need understanding. We need someone to ask us why we're hurting, to help us find a way out, to understand that we don't all have the same support.

I know I'm not a bad person. I was a kid trying to survive. My younger siblings started to mimic my behavior, and that was the wake-up call I needed. I couldn't let them end up like me. ***I'm 22 now and I'm working hard to make a different life for me, my younger siblings, and my daughter. I want to help them to see that there's more to life than the hood.*** I'm signing up for school again and I'm excited. I want to go to college and go into real estate or data analysis.

It's so easy to pick up the wrong things, because it's always available, but picking up the correct things, you have to build that for yourself. It's harder, but I'm enjoying the journey.

–Alexis J.

Part 1: Understanding

Most of the young people we spoke with were first detained between ages 12 and 15 — adolescent children who should be playing sports, studying for tests, and figuring out who they are.

Many shared stories of having their first interaction with the court system as early as elementary school.

Adolescence is a complex time of human development. The areas of the brain that govern self-regulation, decision-making, and impulse control are still developing until our mid-twenties.[11] This can lead to young people making impulsive choices that, to them, seem completely rational — especially in times of heightened emotions or stressful scenarios.[3]

Taking risks and making mistakes is a normal part of growing up. All adolescents, regardless of background, are more likely to engage in risk-taking or impulsive behavior like sneaking out with friends, speeding, and getting into fights. Pushing and bumping up against boundaries is an essential part of how young people learn. This type of behavior peaks during adolescence and declines rapidly, tapering off during the mid-twenties.[12] **Most youth who engage in delinquent actions will simply age out of this behavior without intervention as they grow and mature.**[11]

However, when youth experience trauma and toxic stress, this important developmental process is interrupted, which can cause behavioral and emotional challenges and increase risk-taking behaviors.[4]

Most of the children and youth who are court-involved were not engaged in serious or violent crimes.

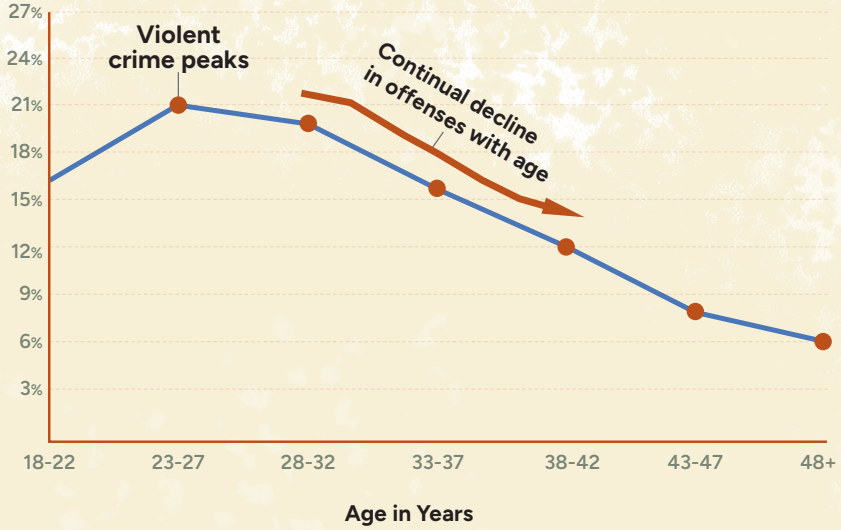
Many were engaging in normal teenage behavior that was met with a criminal justice response, rather than a behavioral health response. Responding to ordinary adolescent behavior with a criminal justice lens is harmful to both children and society.

Young people do not have the control or freedom to remove themselves from their environment in the same way as adults. However, the children and youth we spoke to described being responsible for adult tasks at a young age and living in unstructured or dangerous environments without support or guidance.

In the pages that follow, we'll share the stories of young people doing their best to survive in situations many would find unimaginable. **Their stories reveal not just challenges, but extraordinary resilience** — showing the transformative power of accountability, support, and healing.

Violent Crime Arrests by Age (2019)

Data shows that offending rates increase during adolescence, reaching a peak in the mid-twenties, and then steeply decline with age.



Public Policy Institute of California. (2023). Are younger generations committing less crime?

In Their Own Words

"I was in a very toxic and abusive place for a long time. Years of psychological, emotional, and physical abuse from the person that's supposed to love and protect you. It rewires your brain."

– Kayla C.

"I feel like the pressure the economy brings onto a young person can be devastating too. It's either make it or break it. And sometimes you have to do things to get money that you don't want to do, but you have to keep on providing and stuff."

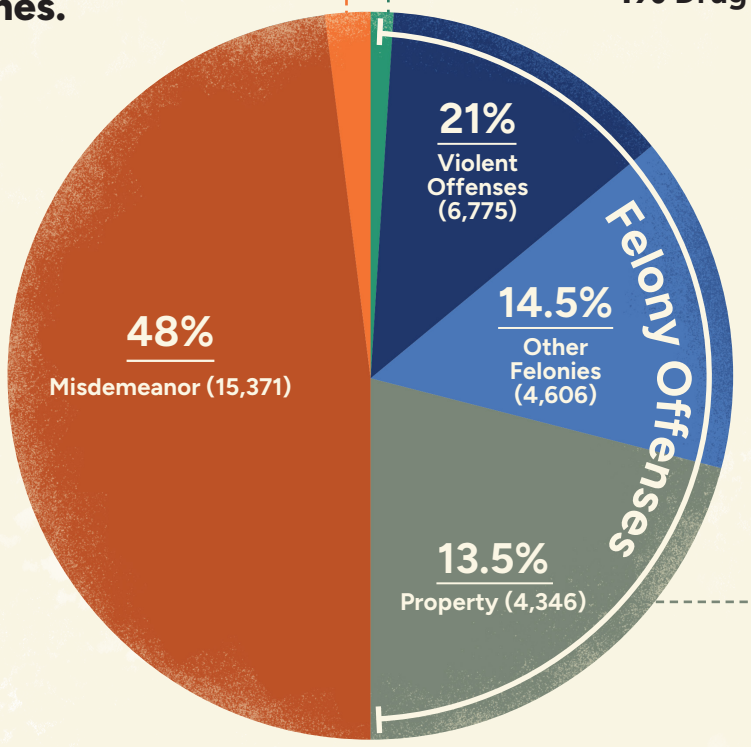
– Ben Z.

"I had to work at a super young age to make a living and take care of my siblings. People aren't looking at that. They think 'Here is this kid who stole a car just because they wanted to.' No — I stole a car because I thought, 'OK, it's too far to walk to pick up my brothers. I don't have any money left for the bus. I could take bus tokens from school, but I'm already in trouble there …' so without any guidance or help, I just had to make the decision I thought was best to take care of my brothers."

– Alexis J.

Most of the children and youth who are court-involved were not engaged in serious or violent crimes.

32,047 Juvenile Arrests in 2023



Theft is classified as a felony based on value, not behavior. Theft over $950 is considered a felony offense, meaning that stealing a smartphone could result in a youth receiving a felony charge.

Sources: California Department of Justice. (2024). Juvenile Justice in California (2023).

"It's Not What They've Done — It's What Happened to Them"

A consistent theme that emerged in the stories of young people who were court-involved was a lack of resources and stability, which led to situations that could have been avoided.

Research on childhood trauma helps us understand this connection: While our experiences as children don't define us, they shape how we develop and interact with the world.

Trauma — particularly when combined with instability in a child's environment — makes it exponentially more challenging to navigate life's difficulties. Children who experience Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) such as abuse, neglect, household dysfunction, or exposure to violence are more likely to become involved with the justice system.

In fact, common offenses like truancy, running away, and substance use are among the most common signs that a child is experiencing abuse.[13]

While many of us have experienced challenges during our lives, families in under-resourced communities are more likely to experience multiple ACEs; and the more ACEs a person experiences, the higher their risk for issues later in life, like substance use or mental health problems.[8] These families are also less likely to have access to the resources needed to buffer the impact of ACEs, such as behavioral health care, financial support, or stable housing.

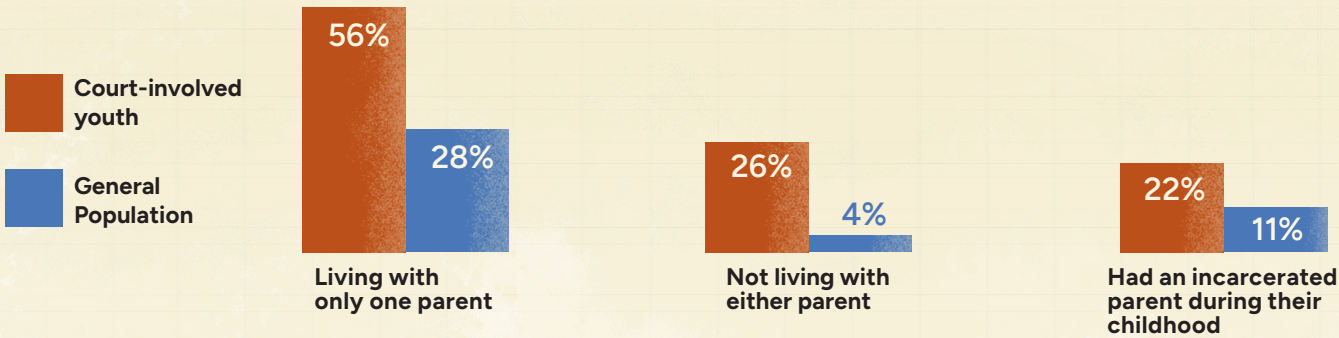
Our individual experiences shape our brain's perceptions of the world around us and what we perceive as a threat. If your world is a generally safe and predictable place, someone tapping your shoulder for attention probably doesn't cause any reason for alarm.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are difficult or traumatic events that happen before age 18. The presence of ACEs — such as abuse, neglect, household dysfunction, or exposure to violence — are known to have lasting impacts on brain development and behavior.[8]

In California, 61.7% of adults have experienced at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), and 16.3% have experienced four or more ACEs."[14]

Prevalence of ACEs among Court-Involved Youth



90% of detained youth are survivors or have witnessed serious violence

26% reported a history of physical and/or sexual abuse

Childhood abuse and neglect before the age of 11 was found to be **the strongest family-related factor** in predicting delinquency.

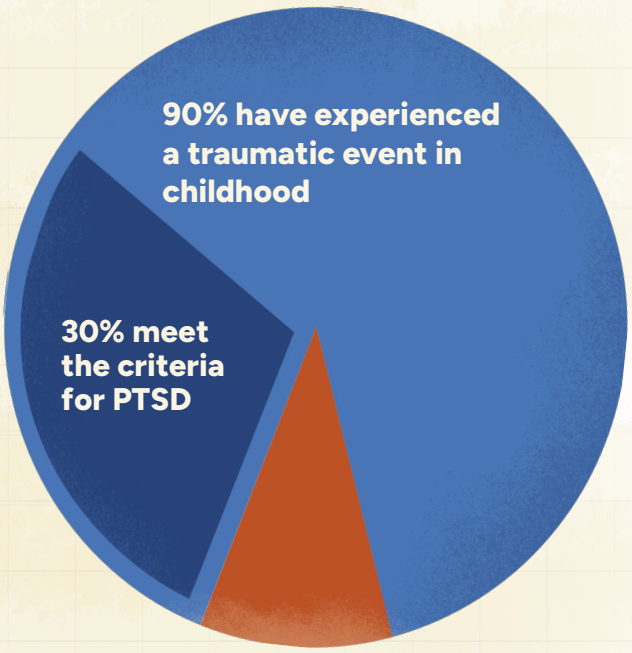
Source: OYCR. (2024). Building Higher Education Pathways for System-Impacted Youth in California

But imagine being a child who has repeatedly been grabbed, shoved, or shaken; for such a child, that same well-intended shoulder tap could set off signals that you are being attacked, and you might react accordingly, not unlike some veterans who experience Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

In fact, young people in the juvenile justice system experience rates of PTSD that are comparable to, or even exceed, those of military veterans.[15]

Our bodies are designed to protect us from danger through the "fight, flight, or freeze" response — a powerful survival mechanism that kicks in when we feel threatened. However, when stress is very intense, or continues for a long time, it can lead to something called "toxic stress" that alters biological development; particularly in the parts of our brain responsible for emotional regulation and logical decision making. Without intervention, these changes may show up as impulsive actions, aggressive outbursts, and other behaviors that can bring young people into conflict with the law.[8]

Of the youth who are justice involved in the United States:



Child Abuse and Neglect: "Trauma Changes Everything: Examining the Relationship Between Adverse Childhood Experiences and Serious, Violent and Chronic Juvenile Offenders.

If you are a child who lives in an environment without adequate support where violence, uncertainty, and instability are constants, your brain adapts to these circumstances and begins to prioritize survival rather than long-term thinking. As a result, it becomes more difficult to plan ahead, make thoughtful decisions, or regulate emotions. What is often seen as more severe risk-taking or delinquent behavior — stealing, substance use, fighting — could also be viewed as a rational coping strategy for youth experiencing toxic stress.

Youth at the highest risk for court involvement are those who are left to manage this stress alone, and when they come in contact with the justice system they are more likely to be detained rather than receiving informal sentences or offered supportive options like diversion or supportive services.[16]

In addition to their own personal traumatic experiences, young people often described the impact of intergenerational trauma and/or historical trauma.[17] Enduring immense loss, isolation, grief, abuse, and post-traumatic stress can become a way of life and even feel normal. Later, when we become parents, we might model these behaviors for our children without even realizing it.

Historical Trauma: The collective psychological wounds carried by entire communities or cultural groups resulting from large-scale traumatic events like slavery, genocide, or systemic oppression. These impacts can persist across generations, affecting both individuals and community.

Intergenerational Trauma: The passing down of traumatic experiences within families, where patterns of behavior, coping mechanisms, and biological stress responses transfer from parent to child across generations.

In Their Own Words

"It's not that these kids wake up one day and decide to make terrible choices. They are growing up in neighborhoods where gangs are endemic, where their parents aren't around — maybe just because they're working multiple jobs. These kids' brains are still developing, their understanding of the world is limited, and they're trying to find some sense of control or belonging the only way they know how. They don't have the reasoning skills at 13 or 14 to step back and say, 'I'm doing this because of unresolved trauma.' They act out because it feels like the only option."

– Probation Officer

"I don't even know what it means to be a normal kid. I wish they understood what we all went through and they knew I was hurting inside. I wish they had more hope and didn't just look at me like a crash out."

– Amira S.

"When violence happens to you, that harm becomes a part of you, and it alters the way you experience the world and your interactions with people. You start to be hypervigilant or think that everybody is there to harm you, so you react to protect yourself. It is going to be a journey to your healing."

– Young Women's Freedom Center

"I grew up witnessing a lot of violence. I was raised in a dysfunctional family, but I want to break that cycle. I want to learn how to be a good parent, and part of that is learning how to express emotions in a healthy way instead of violence."

– Aaron W.

"I was 13 or 14 and had been molested by my stepdad since I was 5 years old. I started smoking weed every day to numb my feelings. Gangs started to try to recruit me and it gave me a different place to go."

– Josh G.

"Let's say you beat up one of your classmates and they get a broken nose, but your parents have money and are willing to write a big fat check. The DA is probably not even going to charge you and just let the families figure it out, and that's going to go away. If it's a poor kid who can't write a check, they're not even going to be offered that opportunity."

– Former Deputy District Attorney

"Some people don't even know their limits because they have not been pushed there. They haven't had to think about committing a survival crime like that. They think, "I could never engage in that activity ..." Well, you haven't had to. Consider the actions of youth who are pushed into survival situations. That does not mean this is how they are gonna act when they have food, housing, support, and stable income."

– Mia D.

The good news is that it's never too late to begin healing, and this was showcased time and time again in conversation with children and youth. Trauma does not doom someone to a life of crime and dysfunction, nor does it remove responsibility for one's actions; but it does mean that a child who has experienced ACEs or other types of toxic stress will likely require intentional support to help them heal and thrive.

> *"When I was younger and getting in trouble, I felt like no one cared for me. I thought I would have to navigate the world by myself. I had this mindset that no one's gonna care for me so I was going to take care of myself by any means necessary. It meant physical altercations because I had nothing to lose. My life felt disposable."*
>
> ***– Jamie G.***

Research indicates that the presence of just a single safe, stable, nurturing, and trusted adult relationship in the life of a young person can buffer the impact of ACEs.[5]

The decisions children and young people make — whether it's engaging in petty theft, joining gangs, or acting out in school — were described by them as being survival strategies.

Recognizing that these actions arise from environments marked by poverty, instability, and trauma helps us to better understand that many of these young people were simply making the best decision their circumstances and resources made available to them. This understanding opens the door to more effective interventions that promote developmentally appropriate accountability and healing.

"If Other People Can Believe in Me, I Can Believe in Me Too"

One of the most powerful tools we have when working with young people is believing in their capacity for change. It is easy to view a young person who has committed a crime through the lens of punishment, but doing so limits their potential and undermines the reality of adolescence — a time characterized by growth, change, and the ability to learn from mistakes.[18]

By providing young people with opportunities to heal, learn, and be mentored, we give them the opportunity to break free from the cycles of trauma that contributed to their behavior.

Our ability to heal from trauma, to build new brain pathways, and respond to situations differently provides an incredible opportunity for intervention. Children and youth who have experienced trauma aren't broken; instead, they are often incredibly strong and capable of inspiring personal growth. With the right kind of support, children and youth described being able to turn their difficult experiences into sources of personal strength. Researchers have found that going through hard times doesn't have to define a person's future. Instead, these experiences can help children and youth develop incredible skills like understanding their emotions, being compassionate towards others, and solving problems in creative ways.[19]

It's not about being naturally tough, but about having supportive people and environments that help them see their own potential. By treating children and young people with respect and helping them recognize their own strengths, we can support them in healing and creating positive, meaningful lives. These children and youth are survivors with remarkable abilities to adapt, learn, and grow if they are provided with the stability, safety, and guidance they need.[5]

When a young person encounters law enforcement and the judicial system, it can be an opportunity to change the trajectory of their lives and their future impact on our

communities. If we seize this opportunity to surround them with mentors, counselors, and programs that address their underlying needs — behavioral health support, education, and community engagement — they are far more likely to succeed in life. Research demonstrates that children and youth who participate in programs that emphasize healing and keep them connected to their community (such as restorative justice programs) experience better behavioral health outcomes and are more motivated to make positive changes.[18]

Conversely, punitive approaches that rely on isolation, harsh punishment, and minimal rehabilitation often exacerbate the very behaviors they aim to correct.[20] In contrast, **when rehabilitation, education, and trauma-informed care were prioritized, youth highlighted their ability to reflect on mistakes, learn new skills, and begin the process of healing.** The justice system has the power to either perpetuate cycles of harm or to break them. By choosing the latter, decision-makers become key players in the long-term success of the children and youth they serve.

Just providing these opportunities is not a fix-all approach. There are circumstances in which youth who have been provided with these resources, support, and opportunities will reoffend. However, these cases are rare. Youth who are diverted from the system or provided with rehabilitative and restorative justice opportunities experience much better outcomes. These include having fewer arrests, committing less violence, completing school at higher rates, and securing increased economic opportunities than youth who are detained.[6]

Closing

> **All children and youth who become involved in the California youth justice system, even those who make serious mistakes, will return to their communities. The question is not if they will return, but *how* they will return.**

When children and youth encounter the justice system, they're at a critical turning point in their lives. When those in positions of authority — judges, probation officers, law enforcement officials, and educators — look past the behavior itself and focus on what's driving the behavior, they can choose the intervention that will have the most impact. Every interaction becomes a chance for that young person to find a different path, to heal from past trauma, to build the skills they need for a better future, and to build safer communities.

"I just had to decide that the things I had done, I did them out of survival. There are people that got hurt and lost their lives, and I can't undo that. What I can do is make sure other youth don't make the same mistakes. By getting over the shame and embarrassment of my actions, by healing from my past — I can be part of making a change. I'm still worthy of my beautiful family, a flourishing business, and getting a great education. Really just becoming the best version of myself."

– Mia D.

Positive Youth Justice Model

It is essential to view the children and youth who become involved in the justice system as potential leaders who can transform their lives and communities. As one youth stated, "If other people can believe in me, I can believe in me too!" This framework from the Positive Youth Justice Model developed by Dr. Jeffrey Butts serves as a guide to aid in this shift.

Changing the Frame: Moving from Victim or Villian to Resource

Assumptions	Youth as Victim	Youth as Villain	Youth as Resource
Origins of Most Delinquent Behavior	Symptom of underlying disturbance	Antisocial impulses, lack of restraint due to permissiveness and the absence of punishment	Normative response to adolescent needs for status, belonging, power and excitement
How Delinquent Youth Compare With Other Adolescents	Fundamentally different in psychological and emotional makeup	Fundamentally different motivations and impulses toward deviant behavior	Largely similar to other adolescents but with fewer social assets
Delinquent Youth Capacity for Behavior Change	Require therapeutic interventions to change behavior	Require strict discipline and the threat of punishment to change behavior	Require sufficient access to supports and prosocial opportunities to change behavior
Principal Intervention Strategy	Individual or family-based therapeutic treatment	Deterrence and retributive punishment	Skill development, attachment and engagement

Adapted from: Butts et al., (2010). Positive Youth Justice.

Part 2: Alternatives

“Locking Us Up Is Not the Best Thing to Do”

Parker's Story

Growing up in the Bay Area, I came from a background of adversity that was tough, but familiar to a lot of kids like me. I was raised by my single mom, and she struggled with addiction and her own issues with the justice system. Because of that, I grew up "system-impacted." I was basically a checklist of the adversity score — poverty, homelessness, disjointed schooling, family members in and out of trouble. ***I went to 18 schools in total.***

When I was younger, I remember how the justice system labeled me — how the judge in juvenile court told me they "knew my type." I wasn't an individual but just another troubled kid. They grouped me with everyone else and their one-size-fits-all punishments really impacted me entering into young adulthood, because I had all these fines and restitution fees, which forced me to start working at 15 and I haven't stopped working since. ***They just treated me like we are all one big person, one big monster.***

Incarceration is cold, harsh, and focused on punishment. ***The confinement felt almost like a training ground, conditioning kids for lives in and out of prison*** rather than helping them heal. Even the juvenile facilities mirror adult prisons. These are still developing kids, yet they're locked away in cells that feel anything but safe or healing. Kids in those settings are given little chance to reflect or grow, or to make meaningful changes in their lives.

The only real support I found came from a community organization. Unlike the court-mandated programs, this organization genuinely cared. They didn't just go through the motions; they went the extra mile. They introduced me to mentors who saw potential in me, even when I didn't see it myself. They guided me, connected me to opportunities, and showed me healthy habits that I'd never known. Even people who weren't assigned to my case would look out for me, send me opportunities, and show up for me in ways I didn't know were possible.

Because of this organization, I discovered possibilities beyond just surviving. I got involved in advocacy, found a path in creative work, and I began to dream again. They connected me to resources for college, gave me chances to volunteer, and gave me work opportunities. It became a place to network, learn, and build a future. ***I think a lot about friends who didn't have access to the same support and how they would have thrived.*** It hurts knowing that they didn't get that chance.

The journey has been full of realizations. Like speaking alongside mentors and leaders who once had authority over me, I now get to stand next to them, advocating for youth in my community. ***That support made me who I am, and I can't imagine where I'd be without it.***

– Parker F.

Part 2: Alternatives

Many of the children and youth interviewed for this report did not have a strong support system, a sense of stability, or a feeling of belonging growing up.

This frequently led to them seeking that support, stability, and connection any way they could — even if it brought them into conflict with the law. In these scenarios, a punitive approach to accountability that relies on detention and incarceration can amplify those feelings of loneliness and isolation, further affecting their well-being and increasing the likelihood of recidivism.

> *"Locking us up... It's not the best thing to do. There were a lot of things I wasn't introduced to until I got locked up. I had a lot of trauma from it."*
>
> **– Jamie G.**

Accountability and healing are not mutually exclusive. The stories shared showcase that a rehabilitative, healing-centered approach that is grounded in restorative justice can center victims and their experiences, support developmentally appropriate accountability, and provide everyone involved a chance to heal from the adverse experiences they have faced.

Positive interventions — such as diversion programs, healing-centered and trauma-informed care, and community-based initiatives — have consistently been shown to reduce recidivism and improve outcomes for young people.[21,22]

In the following sections of this report, we will explore the impacts of incarceration and the transformative power community-based interventions had on the children and youth interviewed.

"The Trauma From Being Incarcerated Impacted My Life When I Got Out"

The decision to remove children and youth from their community and place them in confinement creates a barrier between them and their ability to thrive long term. Incarceration stifles normal adolescent development by removing their opportunity to learn, grow, and mature into thriving adults.[23]

For many children and youth, their family and community is a part of their culture, and practicing cultural traditions can serve as a form of prevention.[24] Youth and children described being stripped from their families and communities and unable to practice their cultural traditions as being harmful and traumatic.

Recognizing that system involvement may be unavoidable in some cases, decision-makers should aim to find the least restrictive program and placement possible to ensure youth are able to maintain a connection with their community and support system.

> *"Staff should better understand youth backgrounds and ask what it was like for us growing up. I know they aren't supposed to know our crimes, but I can tell they do based on the way they treat specific people. I think we would be treated better if they knew what we went through as kids instead."*
>
> **– Dante M.**

The use of extended sentencing and punitive measures are counterproductive in achieving the goal of reducing crime and increasing public safety.

"It seems like the system would rather have you commit another crime and return to prison than help you rehabilitate."

– Daniel L.

Research consistently shows that incarceration and detention can actually create more crime.[7] Youth who are detained have significantly higher rates of recidivism compared to youth with similar characteristics and offending histories who are instead offered probation or community alternatives.[25] Even short stays have significant impacts on recidivism rates. Children and youth who are detained prior to their court hearing are substantially more likely to end up deeper in the justice system, and **the odds of recidivism increase by 1% every day a youth spends in confinement.**[26]

Children and youth discussed how spending long periods in confinement left them feeling powerless, leading them to believe that returning to poor choices was unavoidable. This hopelessness comes from a lack of control and constant negative experiences in detention facilities, which make it harder for them to pursue positive change or personal growth.[27]

Lengthy incarcerations limit access to supportive relationships, education, and skill-building opportunities that help children and youth build resilience and take charge of their future. Without these, it becomes difficult for them to imagine a productive life after release.[28] Research shows that these challenges contribute to higher recidivism rates, as the punitive environment fails to address the root causes of their behavior or support meaningful rehabilitation.[29]

Not only does incarceration hinder public safety efforts, but it significantly impacts a young person's ability to thrive in adulthood.

YOUTH INCARCERATION OUTCOMES:

Lower wages, fewer weeks worked, and less job experience

Lower Educational Attainment:

Two-thirds of youth released from residential facilities never re-enroll in school. Among youth who are arrested, those who are not incarcerated had higher rates of graduation.

Poorer General Health:

Youth who were incarcerated are **2.5x more likely to die prematurely** compared with youth who were arrested but never incarcerated.

Mental Health Challenges:

Incarcerated youth have **4x the likelihood** of experiencing **depression** and **2x the likelihood** of having **suicidal thoughts**

Sources:
- The Sentencing Project
- OJJDP
- Journal of Urban Economics
- Journal of Crime and Justice
- Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
- Archives of General Psychiatry

"It Takes a Village to Heal Our Kids, and That Village Should Not Be Punitive"

The idea that "it takes a village to raise a child" rings particularly true when it comes to supporting children and youth who have come to the attention of law enforcement and become court-involved.

> **Research has consistently shown that youth who remain in their communities, rather than being moved into punitive and confined settings like detention centers, experience better social, educational, and emotional outcomes.[30]**

Implementing a healing-centered and trauma-informed care approach acknowledges that many children and youth involved in the youth justice system have been exposed to adverse experiences that affect their decision-making, behavior, and emotional regulation.[8] Rather than treating children and youth as law violators, trauma-informed and healing-centered care views their behavior as a symptom of deeper, unresolved issues and unmet needs that require attention and healing.

Studies have shown that trauma-informed approaches result in decreased aggression, improved behavioral health outcomes, and lower recidivism rates.[31] By addressing the root causes of behavior — such as untreated trauma, mental health disorders, or the effects of toxic stress — this approach shifts the focus from punishment to healing and growth.

Youth who receive trauma-informed support are far more likely to engage positively in rehabilitation programs and, if they experienced incarceration, reintegrate successfully into their communities.[32] Programs that allow for the involvement of family members, school systems, and local organizations in the rehabilitative process create a support network that aids the youth's development and reduces the likelihood of future offenses.[5]

Community-based alternatives to incarceration keep youth within their communities and help them remain connected to positive influences while still addressing their behavior in meaningful ways.[33] Grassroots, faith-based, and civic organizations offer programs that divert youth away from the system, engage them in positive development activities, and address the unmet needs that are preventing their success.[25] The support, counseling, and skill-building opportunities these programs provide are effective at moving young people away from delinquency and cost a fraction of the price of incarceration.[25]

> **This approach has a positive impact on more than just youth; facilities that integrate trauma-informed practices also see positive outcomes for staff.**

In environments where staff are trained to understand the impacts of trauma, there are reduced incidents of violence and a healthier work atmosphere. This mutual benefit creates a more stable and supportive environment for both youth and those working within the system.[34]

"I feel like receiving a support system changed my path, because I realized someone actually cared for me and there was someone to talk to. That helped remove a lot of barriers."

– Desirae H.

In Their Own Words

"Someone from a community organization would visit me weekly at the group home, and it gave me a sense of normalcy. They let me talk, we would go out to eat, and relax. It helped me keep my sanity. They helped me pay my deposit when I found my place. They are not a blessing in disguise — they are made fully aware they are a blessing, and more youth need this opportunity."

– Issac V.

"Many of the kids come from impoverished communities or were abandoned by their families. It doesn't mean they're garbage that should just get tossed away. They needed help, they needed love, they needed support."

– Native Dads Network

"You're less likely to commit crimes when you have family stability and have your needs met. I hope when other youth get let out they can find the support to remain in a positive environment. It will help them not come back into the system."

– Andre S.

I know it's cliché to say, but I literally don't even know where I'd be if I had not been connected with this organization."

– Parker F.

"If people knew the quality of human beings that we throw away, the system would be different."

– Healing Dialogue and Action

"When we enter the system, our actions are seen under a microscope. It's all seen as an issue and blown out of proportion. Kids are kids, we're gonna mess up and make mistakes. Putting us in a box or providing counseling for two weeks is not beneficial. Invest real time and effort with us."

– Jamie G.

"A lot of times young people have gone through their life seeing a pattern of the adults who were around giving up and pushing them off to the next person. That kind of instability is really challenging for a young person. We try to create a space and be the adults in a young person's life who is not going to repeat that pattern. We're going to continue to support them no matter what it is that they're working through."

– Fresh Lifelines for Youth

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice has become a popular term that can have various meanings to different people. Communities United for Restorative Justice, an Oakland-based nonprofit, says that at its core "restorative justice really means centering and repairing harm in relationships, instead of wanting to punish someone for breaking a rule."

Restorative justice focuses on accountability and making amends rather than punitive isolation. This process centers the person who experienced harm, providing them with the support they need to heal from the experience.[35] Programs with this focus have been shown to help youth better understand the consequences of their actions, repair harm, and build healthier relationships with their community.[22]

> **Youth who participate in restorative justice programs are significantly less likely to reoffend, and if incarcerated, experience improved community reintegration upon release.[36]**

Importantly, most victims find restorative justice programs empowering because it allows them to voice their experiences and directly participate in the justice process.

> **Studies show that victims feel more satisfied and perceive the outcomes as fairer when involved in restorative programs because of the focus on repairing harm rather than merely punishing offenders.[37]**

This approach often leads to higher rates of victim satisfaction and a stronger sense of closure than traditional punitive systems.[38]

While a restorative justice approach can be implemented within the court systems, restorative justice programs are most effective when they are based in and overseen by community organizations instead of the court.[35]

A **community-led program** in Oakland, California, provides **diversion-based restorative justice interventions for youth** who have been accused of serious crimes.[42]

IN 1 YEAR

One year after program completion, **youth were 44% less likely to be convicted of a new offense** when compared with youth who had similar offenses and had been formally processed.[42]

300+ Participants

In the first decade of its initiation, over **300 youth completed the program**, with 62% of them being accused of felony offenses.[42]

High Approval

Most notably, however, **nearly all victims (91%) approved of the process** and said **they would participate again** or recommend it to other victims.[42]

~80% Cheaper

Not only was the program **more effective at providing victims with what they needed** while **successfully reducing future offenses** by the youth, but it was also **significantly less expensive than formal probation**. This program cost an average of $4,500 to complete, compared with the $23,000 cost of probation.[42]

When implemented properly, these programs keep youth at home by diverting them from the system while effectively reducing reoffending rates and improving victim satisfaction — even when the youth has been accused of a serious offense.[35]

> *"I have a friend who passed away. He was so smart and just needed these services. For whatever reason, he wasn't in that same net that I got caught in. He was on the outskirts and just didn't get it."*
>
> **– Desirae H.**

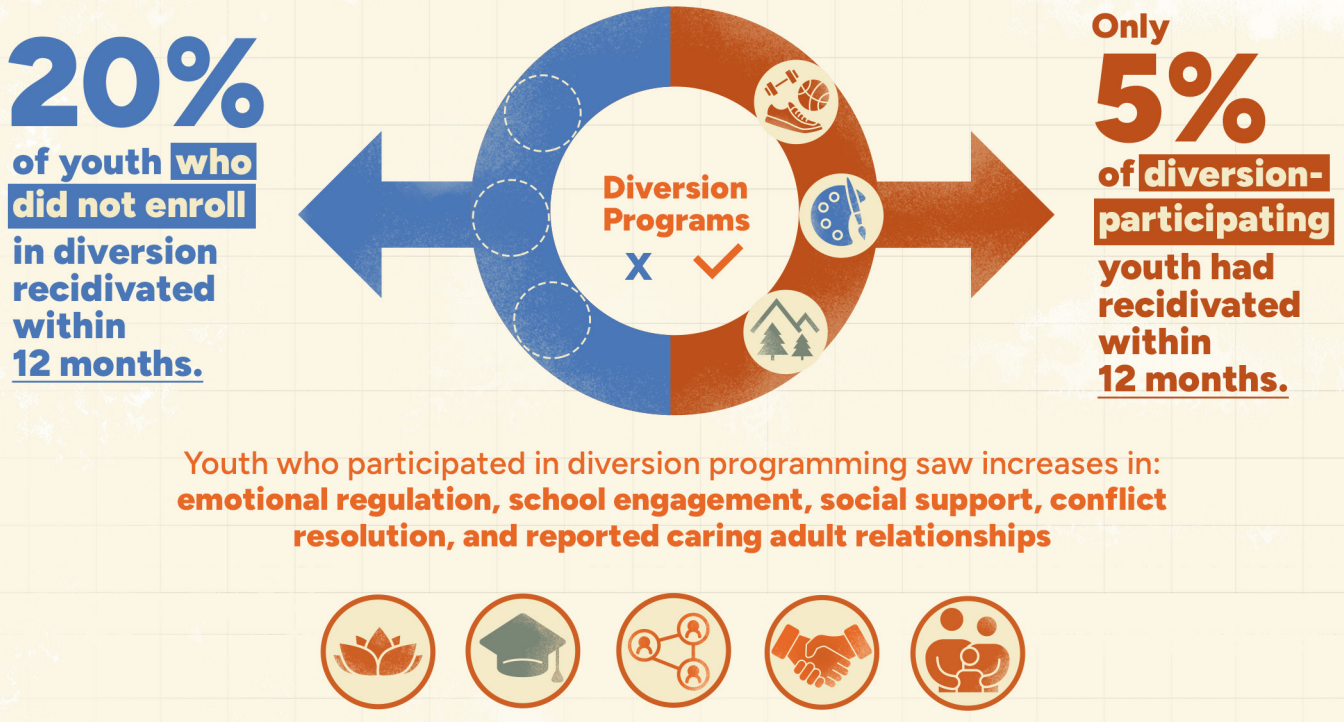
Diversion

Diversion creates an opportunity for children and youth to have their actions addressed outside of the formal court system.[6] This alternative to court involvement is more appropriate for youth development and better addresses the root causes of behavior than formal processing.[6]

Diversion is different from informal or voluntary probation programs, which often focus on compliance and monitoring, making them similar to formal probation. These approaches conflict with adolescent development, which thrives on opportunities to learn and grow from mistakes. Compliance-based models can actually increase the likelihood of deeper system involvement.[43]

In contrast, diversion programs connect children and youth to community organizations that provide supportive relationships, counseling, and positive development opportunities. These programs address the underlying causes of behavior and help set youth on a path to long-term success.[6]

Not only has diversion been shown to reduce the likelihood of future law enforcement encounters, incarceration, and involvement in violence, but youth who are diverted from formal system involvement are more likely to graduate high school, enroll in college, and earn higher incomes as adults compared with youth who experience formal processing.[6]



Source: Los Angeles County Office of Youth Development: The Impact of Youth Diversion in Los Angeles County

In Their Own Words

"If we really want to strengthen restorative practice and transformative justice in our communities, it has to be held by community organizations that represent those communities and rooted in cultural traditions.

– CURYJ

"Committing to a healing path consists of a lot of self-reflection on all the trauma and harm that they suffered and internalized as children and then took it out on themselves and others — some of them committing horrific and terrible acts. That reflection and healing is a grueling process. Most folks on the outside are never going to go through anything similar."

– Healing Dialogue and Action

"I think the role of probation should really be seen as connectors. What can we build in the community and with law enforcement partners so youth can be diverted and don't have to be referred to us? We can't do this work ourselves. We have to accept that we need all the assistance we can get and there's plenty of community-based agencies with the expertise to give that assistance. So probation needs to be able to find those services and make those connections."

– Probation Chief

"Just because we need to work on ourselves, think about the mistakes we've made, or forge a new path forward doesn't mean we need to be in jail cells that are so similar to adult prison facilities. We should be in environments that promote healing and use restorative justice practices."

– Parker F.

"There is this girl who was born and raised here in the city, and they sent her far away for placement. When she came back as a young adult she felt very disconnected from the people that she grew up with. They're forced to move on without you after so many years, some of them lose their housing or had to get a smaller place. She felt like a stranger in her own community because she was removed for so many years. These things are really complicated and we should be able to support this young person in a different way."

– Young Women's Freedom Center

"If you get sent to juvenile hall, it shouldn't affect you for the rest of your life. We need a support system. We need to be able to reach out to family members and make sure we have somewhere to go before we get out."

– Desirae H.

"What we're doing is smart justice. 100% of the youth that we work with in the juvenile facilities are going to be released at some point and at a young age. It makes a lot of sense to help them rehabilitate, because who wants somebody to live in their community that hasn't undergone a rehabilitation process? We want safety for the community and safety for the young people that are returning to the communities."

– Anti-Recidivism Coalition

Diversion is most effectively implemented in two ways:

Pre-arrest diversion happens when the choice is made to not transfer a youth to juvenile hall and the behavior is handled through informal channels like a school or community program.[6]

Pre-court diversion is when system workers determine that the young person transferred to juvenile hall should have the issue handled outside of the formal court system.[6]

The benefits of diversion extend beyond the youth who are provided this alternative.

> **Diversion away from system involvement creates positive effects for other youth who are court-involved, system workers, and the community as a whole.**

When more youth are diverted, the caseload of probation teams is significantly reduced.[43] This allows probation officers to focus more attention on providing individualized support to youth who have higher needs, which will ultimately improve their ability to succeed.[43]

The shift from a culture focused on compliance to one focused on assistance creates better conditions for young people and allows for the development of individualized support that emphasizes successful reentry. This cycle better aids in the overall improvement of public safety whilesimultaneously reducing the economic burden of a punitive approach.

Diversion is also significantly less expensive than incarceration. **Even for youth who have higher needs, diversion costs an average of $4,500 while incarceration costs an average of over $300,000 per youth annually.**[44]

Further, youth who are diverted are more likely to pay restitution to the harmed parties compared with youth who are formally processed. The decreased likelihood of additional involvement in the court system further alleviates the future burden to taxpayers compared with a punitive approach. This means more funding becomes available to youth with higher levels of need and for communities to implement positive development opportunities that can prevent crime from happening in the first place.

Less Restrictive Programming

Less restrictive programming (LRP) for court-involved youth can be provided in a variety of formats including community-based interventions, diversion programs, restorative justice initiatives, group homes, and ranches.

LRPs serve as alternatives to incarceration or as part of a step-down process to support reintegration into the community after confinement. Unlike incarceration, which isolates youth and often reinforces negative behaviors, **less restrictive programming provides structured, supportive environments that address underlying causes of behavior while promoting accountability.**

> ***"I'm a huge fan of the Independent Living Program (ILP). I think when you're trying to grow and learn things, ILP is the place to go learn things, get paid, get resources, and get food."***
>
> ***– Kayla C.***

Investing in less restrictive alternatives ensures justice is developmentally appropriate and fosters safer communities by promoting meaningful change in the lives of youth.

These programs recognize that youth are still forming their identities and decision-making abilities and fostering prosocial behavior by maintaining ties to families, schools, and supportive networks. Less restrictive programming addresses the root causes of delinquency — such as unmet behavioral health needs or exposure to adverse experiences — rather than merely punishing the behavior. By equipping youth with coping skills, education, and job readiness, these programs reduce the likelihood of future offenses, benefiting both individuals and their communities by preventing the cycle of reoffending and reintegrating youth as productive members of society.[11]

Closing

Supporting young people before issues occur is critical to public safety and crime reduction efforts.

However, when issues do occur, it is essential that every effort is made to prevent further harm to both the young person and those who were impacted by their actions.

For many children and youth, the court system may be the first place they encounter the opportunity for stability and structure. If we use this opportunity to surround them with mentors, counselors, and programs that address their underlying needs while keeping them connected with their family and community, they are far more likely to succeed.

It is up to us to provide the children and youth in our care with the support and empathy they are asking for and is essential to building healthy kids and communities.

"I'm not worthless. I'm great, I'm triumphant, I'm not gonna end up dead or on drugs, I'm gonna do great and there is this whole community that believes in me, and if they can believe in me I can believe in me too! So here I am still smiling."

– Jayden L.

"In L.A. County in general, 95% of the youth who complete diversion don't rescind it. Those numbers are real numbers. Those are big numbers. We want to divert as many youth as possible away from the system and towards organizations that will give them the holistic approach and the care that they need. Some of them don't even feel safe at home, so having organizations to take care of them before they even go into the system and do that preventative work is essential."

– Anti-Recidivism Coalition

Part 3: Opportunities

"We Want the Opportunity to Be a Part of Something Bigger Than Ourselves"

Victoria's Story

I'm a 22-year-old female and I am here to tell you my story. Up until about two months ago, I had been in jail for about six years, but that's not where my story begins. So I am here to give you a little bit of context. *I got placed in foster care during my early teen years, moving from one group home to another, always struggling to understand what family really meant.*

When I was 16, I made a terrible mistake. Desperate and confused, I committed a robbery. That day ended in tragedy, with the death of a young man who was only 17. I was sentenced to seven years in juvenile prison, and my life seemed to spiral even further out of control. *There were so many people telling me I would never be able to make something of myself after this. At first, I believed it.* All I felt was anger and sadness, trapped in a cycle of guilt and regret.

But then something unexpected happened when I got sentenced. *The father of the young man who lost his life came to my court, and I will never forget what he said: He told me he wanted me to do better, to live the life that his son would never get to live.* His words hit me hard. I realized that even though I couldn't change the past, I could choose what kind of future I wanted to build.

Turning my life around wasn't easy. I struggled a lot in the beginning. *But I was determined to honor the family's wish and make something of myself.* I started working while I was in the facility, doing everything I could to pay off some of my restitution.

Each step forward, no matter how small, gave me a sense of purpose. *At first, I could not find it in me to forgive myself, but eventually, I was slowly finding happiness in the progress I made.*

Then, ***the facility I was in shut down. I was moved to my county's less restrictive program, which turned out to be a blessing in disguise.*** While still in custody, I started college. I'm currently a sophomore at community college, working toward my Associate of Arts degree in Sociology with a minor in Ethnic Studies. Education became a lifeline for me, a way to imagine a different future.

Being in the less restrictive program also allowed me to experience the world outside in ways I hadn't for years. ***I went out with custody staff, learning more about being an adult and seeing just how much the world had changed over the past six years.*** I got a job at a retail store and worked there for almost four months before transitioning into the community.

Now, I have taken my biggest step yet: On September 3, 2024, I was released with a GPS ankle monitor. ***I have my own apartment, something I found with the help of a community-based organization that's been supporting me with my rent.*** I am continuing my job and my studies, determined to build a stable life for myself.

My journey hasn't been easy, and I know there will be challenges ahead, but I'm ready to face them. ***I want to live a life that honors the memory of the young man who lost his life and the father who believed I could be better. I want to prove to myself and to the world that it's never too late to start over.*** I feel like I am at the point in my life where I am doing everything that I can to do what that young man's father asked of me.

– Victoria

(Youth Advisory Board Member)

Part 3: Opportunities

It shouldn't take an arrest for us to invest in our youth's safety and success. However, a powerful pattern emerged from these stories: Access to real support and resources often came only after these young people entered the justice system.

They described finally getting connected to counseling, mentorship, educational support, and other services that could have made a difference years earlier. This reality exposes a painful truth — many young people have to encounter the court system to receive the very support and resources they needed all along to thrive.

The moment when a young person encounters the court system has the power to shape their entire future, and those in positions of authority — judges, probation officers, law enforcement, and educators — have a critical role in determining if this will serve as a positive turning point. Providing youth with equal access to the opportunities they need to thrive not only ensures their long-term success, but the safety and success of our communities.

In the following section, we will expand on what youth said was necessary for their success and the role system workers can play in ensuring that opportunity.

"We Are Wasting Crucial Time to Invest"

When young people talked about their experiences encountering the justice system, they often describe feeling powerless, confused, and voiceless — exactly the opposite of what research shows creates positive change. According to probation transformation research, transparency and youth engagement aren't just about fairness: They're directly linked to better outcomes, reduced recidivism, and increased community safety.[40]

Transparency in the court system is vital for youth involved in the justice system to ensure fairness, build trust, and promote rehabilitative outcomes. Without clear visibility into how decisions are made, young people described feeling alienated or disempowered, which exacerbated their feelings of injustice and mistrust in authority.

> ***"I do whatever it takes to keep kids in the community and keep them together with their families. It's an individualized approach to finding out their competencies, passions, and strengths. You know, most of them have really come from really tough, difficult situations in their families and communities. So just using that lens to really convey to my staff why we need to work in this way. We really need to establish a rapport and build trust with these young people and their families. We want to know what they need to succeed and make this, probation, a really quick stop in their long trajectory of life. We want to make this experience as good as possible."***
>
> ***– Probation Chief***

Transparency can address these concerns by ensuring processes are open, equitable, and understandable. Moreover, when young people understand the reasons behind judicial decisions and their associated outcomes, they are more likely to engage positively with the justice process.[42]

Decisions affecting young people's futures often happen without their understanding or input. In California, recent data shows that lack of transparent processes and limited youth input are significant barriers to successful rehabilitation.[41]

Young people reported being unable to access services while waiting for court dates, not understanding their rights, and having little say in decisions that dramatically impact their futures.

> **Providing immediate access to programming and services is critical. Delays in connecting youth to necessary interventions can lead to missed opportunities for meaningful reform.**

Youth involved in the justice system are at a critical developmental stage, and timely support can disrupt cycles of criminal behavior while fostering personal growth. When youth diversion programs and services are implemented promptly, they significantly reduce recidivism rates and improve long-term outcomes.[40]

By addressing underlying issues, such as trauma or unstable living conditions, programs can prevent future offenses and help youth build healthier relationships within their communities. These services offer a sense of hope, demonstrating to youth involved in the justice system that the system seeks their rehabilitation rather than their punishment.

> *"It's frustrating. My court dates keep getting pushed back and you can't be put into a program until you are on probation, but you can't be on probation until you have a hearing and get a sentence. Just let everyone join a program whether they have probation or not."*
>
> ***– Russel F.***

Research has shown that youth-centered planning can lead to better outcomes, as it fosters collaboration, respects their autonomy, and encourages personal responsibility.[40] When youth were able to be active participants in determining the services they received and developing their treatment plans, they felt a sense of ownership and were more likely to engage fully in the rehabilitative process. Incorporating youth voices ensures that interventions are tailored to their individual needs, strengths, and circumstances.

Involving youth in decision-making also helps to build trust between them and the justice system. Many youth involved in the justice system have experienced environments where their voices were ignored or undervalued. Offering them a role in shaping their future demonstrates respect for their agency and reinforces the system's commitment to their growth and success.

To ensure these efforts are effective, the system must have robust avenues for holding workers accountable to service plans. Caseworkers, probation officers, and other system actors play a critical role in ensuring that youth receive the services and support they are entitled to. Without mechanisms to monitor adherence to service plans, there is a risk of neglect or inconsistency in care, undermining the rehabilitative goals of the justice system.

Accountability measures can include regular audits, oversight committees, and feedback mechanisms for youth and families. Independent monitoring bodies or ombudspersons can provide an impartial review of how services are delivered and whether they align with agreed-upon plans. For example, the Juvenile Justice Accountability Project emphasizes the role of community-based organizations in monitoring system performance, offering an additional layer of oversight, and ensuring that youth voices are heard in the process.[44]

"During the investigation process, I know that it is a right that guardians are there, but it should be required that either a guardian or lawyer are present. In my questioning, the detectives just questioned me without anyone there to explain. This was a new system for me and I had no clue that I didn't have to answer the questions alone. A child should not be questioned alone. It should be a requirement that parents, guardians, and lawyers are there so children aren't getting screwed over."

– Issac V.

"Not everyone in the system knows how the system works. I think people pick and choose, which is unfortunate. You get more grace if you can make the judge laugh and you get a shorter sentence, or it might make them mad and then you don't get help. If you're the quiet kid, it can be seen either way. People's charisma affects their time."

– Kayla C.

"A lot of the other youth I know didn't know about available resources or services out there, because their social worker didn't tell them about it, and then they became homeless."

– Alex B.

Transparency, youth involvement, timely access to services, and worker accountability are interconnected pillars of an effective and just youth justice system. By prioritizing these elements, the justice system can better serve youth, reduce recidivism, and create opportunities for positive transformation.

"Being bounced around and not asked what it is that we need ... having to reexplain ourselves over and over again is not good. We want genuine connections, ways to grow, access to opportunities, and ways to be successful. We need to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. Having councils, committees, boards, and groups that focus on building hope, and give us voice and purpose is so important."

– Youth Advisory Board

"Throughout my journey, I worked with three different attorneys. I felt like the level of representation varied from decent to very bad, very poor. The first person that was representing me, they gave me a lot of time to ask questions to understand what was going on. But towards the end of being incarcerated, I was being ignored. No answers, no explanations, no recommendations, and not really giving me a clear idea of what was happening."

– Luke S.

"Receiving a Support System Changed My Path"

In the first part of this report focused on understanding, we discussed that many children and youth who were impacted by the court system lacked basic needs such as housing, food, and clothing. Or, they came from under-resourced households or stressful environments — driving youth to engage in crimes of survival.

First and foremost, children and youth must have these basic needs met and be provided with a sense of safety, stability, and support. Whether these young people are diverted or formally processed into the court system, it is essential to hear directly from them regarding what they need and to ensure they are connected to organizations that can provide them with these resources.

> **In most situations, when young people are provided with the support and resources missing in their lives, they will successfully avoid further engagement with the court system without any additional intervention.**[11]

Every young person who encounters the justice system brings their own unique story, challenges, and strengths. Cookie-cutter programs and one-size-fits-all approaches often fail because they don't account for the real complexities of young people's lives.

"The way we are incarcerating young people needs to change. There should be a way to give a second, third, fourth, or fifth... to give them a chance. Not incarcerating young people and instead providing them the support they need to grow, and the mentorship, and even financially helping families. Some of us are having to steal to have enough clothes in our closet. "

– Jamie G.

Research backs up what young people have been saying all along — interventions work best when they're built around the specific needs, circumstances, and goals of each young person and their family. When children and youth, along with their families, are able to be true partners in creating these plans instead of being told what to do, they're more likely to stay engaged and succeed.[50]

In the following sections, we'll explore the programs and services that the children and youth we talked to identified as crucial to their success. These approaches are backed by research showing real results in helping young people heal, grow, and build the lives they want to live.

This is about more than just offering services — it's about making sure those services actually make sense for each young person's situation. Whether it's behavioral health support, educational programs, job training, or family counseling, the key is matching the right combination of support to each young person's needs and goals.

"These are kids who literally just didn't have enough food growing up, or enough hugs, or somewhere to sleep consistently. That's all it is and it turns into this ugly thing and these bad decisions. But I don't think that punishment is the way to go."

– Parker F.

"Resources that are customized are most helpful, and it doesn't feel good when you're not able to get the resources that actually fit your needs properly."

– Youth Advisory Board

Credible Messengers

Credible messengers are trained facilitators and members of the community who share characteristics and experiences with the children and youth they are serving, including incarceration.[35] The young people interviewed said that shared experiences allow credible messengers to relate and communicate with them in a way that others cannot, because they truly understand these youths' mindsets, the challenges they face, and the trauma they have experienced. This ability to connect made youth more likely to open up to a credible messenger about their goals, concerns, and needs.[35]

Credible messengers are able to effectively help youth navigate their path to success because they have done it themselves.[45]

> **Youth have described that access to these mentors led to them accepting services they previously resisted, because credible messengers are able to share their own experiences and show that success was possible for them.[45]**

Credible messengers usually serve as a critical component of an individualized, comprehensive success plan that they can develop in partnership with the youth and their families. These programs can occur in the community as part of diversion, or a youth may be connected to a credible messenger program that is doing reach-in services at secure facilities. **When community organizations that offer credible messenger programs are able to work with probation teams to provide services within facilities, credible messengers become critical intermediary partners to help both the youth and probation teams meet their goals.**

The relationship allows credible messengers to serve as advocates who work with probation and court staff to provide youth the services they need, while acting as guides to help youth navigate their path to healing and success. This includes learning the skills needed to succeed in the world and advocate for themselves.[35]

When credible messenger programs are implemented within secure facilities, mentors are able to establish relationships early and provide consistency for young people as they transition back into the community. By walking alongside the youth every step of the way, credible messengers provide the stability, support, and positive mentorship that young people need to succeed.

Credible messenger programs are shown to be effective at reducing recidivism rates, but it is essential to ensure that best practices in selection and training are being followed and the individuals serving as mentors are a good fit for each young person they serve.[45] It is not enough to simply have the necessary training and shared background — young people should have the opportunity to find a credible messenger who they have a true connection with.

Credible messenger programs can be transformative experiences for the youth they serve. When these programs are supported by a foundation of trust and mutual respect, they can serve as a bridge between the justice system and community, providing transformative mentorship that guides young people toward brighter futures.

In Their Own Words

"This is more than just a paycheck. I aspire to leave a meaningful legacy and show the youth I work with what change looks like. I don't want them to lose hope."

– Anti-Recidivisim Coalition Credible Messenger

"I can't be in the community supporting them in the future. So making connections that will be available for them when they need it the most — when bad people are knocking on the door and temptation and the urge to relapse is just all around them — that's when I think prioritizing building those relationships is a very wise tactic, because we just can't do it all as probation staff. Our jurisdiction ends here at the door."

– Probation Officer

"I think the most important factor in any young person being receptive to change and growth and healing is somebody that they can relate to, somebody that has had similar experiences as them."

– Youth Advisory Board

"Credible messengers bring experiences that judges, probation officers, and social workers can't. This credibility should be taken seriously, just as much as a degree in study, because they have the irreplaceable ability to connect with the youth on a level that someone who hasn't gone to prison can't."

– Anti-Recidivism Coalition Credible Messenger

"The energy and characteristics of the person delivering the intervention is so important. This is looked over, and people think you can just train people to work well with youth, when some people just don't get it. Especially those who just want to assign what they think is best for us. Make sure we are included in everything that is about us. That is important."

– Youth Advisory Board

"We service the youth in facilities, and in our work, we try to empower these youth. The dynamics in these facilities with peer pressure is great. There's a lot of followers, very few leaders. And if there are leaders, they're usually leading these youth in the wrong direction. We facilitate self-help groups like Financial Literacy, Criminals and Gang Members Anonymous, Anger Management, and Conflict Resolution. We're currently facilitating Beyond Coping Skills, which is dialectical behavior therapy, and Seeking Safety, which is a curriculum that is making them aware of PTSD and substance abuse."

– Anti-Recidivism Coalition Credible Messenger

Recommendations for Establishing Credible Messenger Programs

The following recommendations were developed based on best-practices shared during interviews with community organizations, system partners, and youth.

1. Establish a Foundation of Trust and Shared Purpose

- **Acknowledge shared goals:** Begin partnerships by emphasizing that all parties — probation officers, court staff, and community organizations — are united in their commitment to the success of the young person.
- **Recognize the expertise of credible messengers:** Value the lived experience and unique insights of mentors who have navigated the justice system, as they are instrumental in connecting with youth.
- **Commit to open communication:** Create transparent channels for sharing information, addressing concerns, and celebrating successes.

2. Co-Develop Program Goals and Structure

- **Define roles collaboratively:** Clearly outline the responsibilities of probation officers, court staff, credible messengers, and community organizations in a way that respects each party's expertise.
- **Align on outcomes:** Establish shared metrics for success, such as reduced recidivism, improved school attendance, or enhanced family relationships.
- **Tailor programming to youth needs:** Collaborate with credible messengers to design programs that address the specific challenges and aspirations of the youth served.

3. Facilitate Strong Relationships

- **Provide joint training opportunities:** Offer shared workshops on trauma-informed care, youth development, and effective communication to ensure probation officers and credible messengers understand each other's roles and approaches.
- **Hold regular team meetings:** Schedule ongoing check-ins between probation staff and community organizations to discuss cases, align strategies, and resolve conflicts.
- **Foster mutual respect:** Encourage probation officers to view credible messengers as equal partners, acknowledging the vital role they play in building trust with youth.

Education

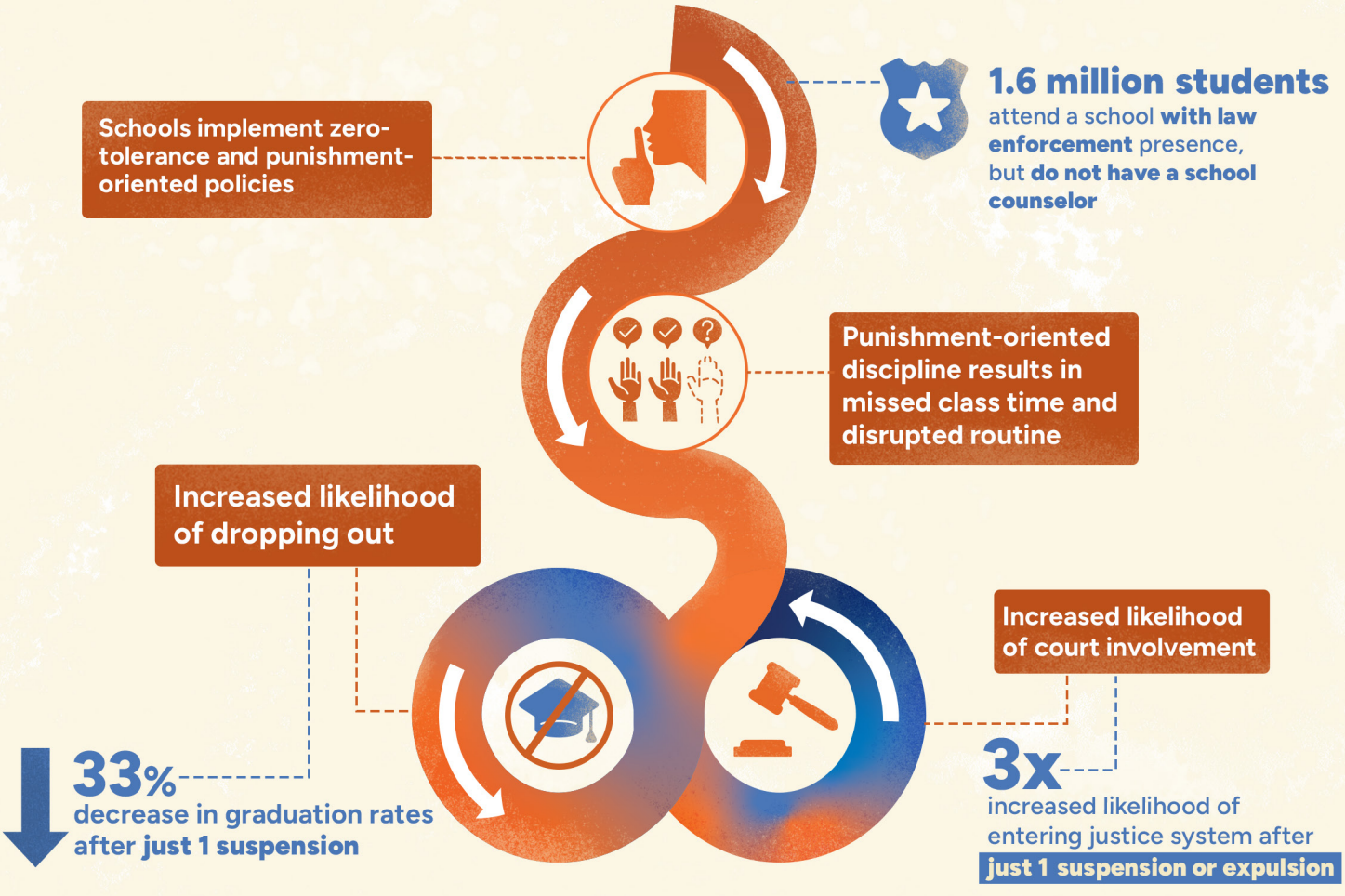
Children and youth frequently described encountering law enforcement and the court system after being referred by school personnel, school resource officers, or after experiencing suspension or expulsion.[51]

Once youth become involved in the juvenile court system, their education and connection to the school system is disrupted, which increases the likelihood they will drop out. Children and youth who do not finish high school have higher rates of incarceration, creating a perpetuating cycle of court involvement that must be disrupted.[50]

"My mom worked and wouldn't be able to take me to school, but I wouldn't have bus fare or passes. I would be begging bus drivers to let me on, and a lot of times they would say no. I would be late and then later labeled as truant and in trouble, but I hadn't done anything wrong. They don't factor in it took me all morning to find a way to get here. There is this assumption that we don't care, but sometimes we can't afford to care."

– Kayla C.

The Equal Justice Society's Report "Breaking the Chains: The School-to-Prison Pipeline, Implicit Bias, and Racial Trauma" provides an overview of the school-to-prison pipeline, contributing factors, and recommendations for improvement.



Adapted from: Equal Justice Society. (2016). Breaking the Chains

Despite school often being the very system that pushed these children and youth into the court system, education was almost always mentioned as being essential to their healing — with a higher-education degree listed among top priorities — when asked which services had the most impact.

"I want to pursue a career in finance and investment banking. I love working on cars, reading, traveling, and shopping. I will graduate with my first associate's degree from the College of the Redwoods in December 2024."

– Blake V.

"I am working on my high school diploma. I have 13 credits to go! School here in the hall has been helpful for me because it's more in line with my learning style. I can study and look at the material at my own pace. I've learned a lot of study tools, so now I know that I can do this on my own and kill it!"

– Devon C.

"I got into college and my life just changed in a snap. It was so crazy and fast. It was August when school started. By September I was in a new apartment. School connected me to Guardian Scholars, where I met a great professor. She extended her help and got me connected with all the members and with local housing. The other members introduced me to a CBO and they gave me the tools I needed to focus my attention on school and what I want to do. I'm trying to change a lot of things. I'm trying to be a different version of myself."

– Mark W.

"The support that has helped the most is the educational programming provided by Rising Scholars and Project Rebound. Education has helped me gain a broader perspective on how people think and what healthy relationships are."

– Jordan W.

"Currently I am trying to combine all my goals and dreams. I want to build a website, I want to have my career based on facilitation and public speaking and various activism engagements. I want to support jobs, schools, and workforces to unlock the potential of their personnel by teaching life skills to foster youth, educating on racial equity and political education. I am passionate about travel, stage performing, showcasing my strengths and passing power on."

– Kayla C.

"My life plan is to basically learn a lot, get into a lot of jobs, and go to college. Basically just growing my mindset and maturing and being a better, more successful person for myself, financially, and for my friends. I am trying to be a wise, beautiful, and better person."

– Dakota S.

A growing body of research supports the idea of education access being a turning point for youth in correctional settings. It has been proven an effective tool for decreasing the likelihood of recidivism, increasing enrollment in school during reentry, and increasing the number of hours worked during adulthood.[47]

Whether it means getting connected and enrolled in their local school, a community organization providing support to achieve attendance goals, or attending classes while in a secure facility — it is essential that access to quality education is a component of each youth's plan if they come in contact with the court system. However, it is not enough for youth to simply have access to education in secure facilities.

Children and youth who are involved in the court system should be provided with the same educational opportunities they would receive if they were not court-involved. Learning plans must be individualized, provide continuity to avoid learning gaps, and meet the standards required for youth to be successful during reentry as they enroll in traditional education settings.[47]

Education opens the door to a variety of opportunities for young people, but integration into educational settings as part of their reentry is critical for reducing recidivism and preventing adverse impacts from confinement.[48] School enrollment, especially higher education enrollment, provides young people with a sense of community and belonging, as well as a connection point to supportive services.[47]

This successful integration begins while a youth is still incarcerated by creating an environment and culture of learning within secure youth facilities that help them identify as a student. The Department of Education and Department of Justice have developed guiding principles for providing high-quality education in juvenile justice secure care settings.

Through collaboration and close partnerships between probation departments, County Offices of Education, and higher education systems — such as the UC, CSU, and California Community Colleges — these pathways to successful higher education can be achieved. There are several statewide and localized programs that can help facilitate and provide funding for these partnerships including Rising Scholars, Project Rebound, and Underground Scholars.

OYCR's report "Building Higher Education Pathways" provides detailed information on the importance of educational pathways and recommendations for successful implementation.

Rising Scholars

Rising Scholars serves nearly 20,000 students who have been justice-involved both on campus and in federal or state prisons, county jails, juvenile facilities, or other correctional institutions with education and services from California Community Colleges.

Project Rebound

Project Rebound provides higher education and supportive services through California State Universities to promote the successful reintegration of individuals who have been formerly incarcerated.

Project Rebound students have a 0% recidivism rate.

Source: California State University. (n.d.) Project Rebound; Rising Scholars Network. (n.d.)

Mental and Physical Health Services

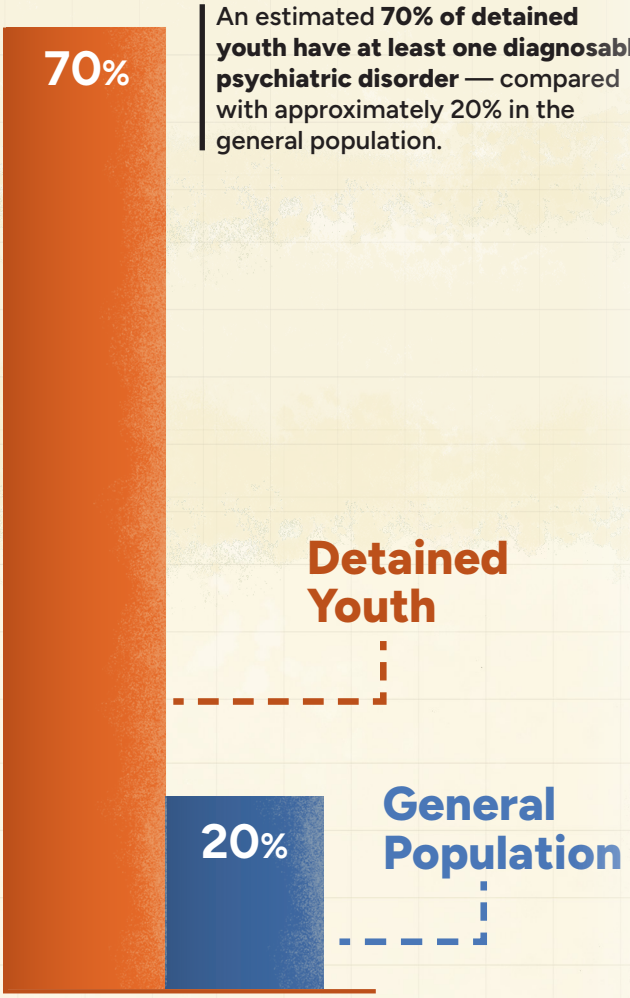
The prevalence of mental health challenges among youth in the juvenile justice system is significant, indicating a substantial gap in prevention and treatment prior to system involvement.[32]

These conditions often include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and mood disorders, many of which stem from histories of trauma, neglect, and systemic inequities.[31]

While these challenges are significant, they are not insurmountable. Adolescence is a critical period of neuroplasticity — the brain's ability to change and adapt in response to experiences — making it possible for targeted interventions to foster lasting positive change.[49] Leveraging this window of brain development is essential for creating opportunities that help youth heal, learn new skills, and reintegrate successfully into their communities.

Detained Youth With Diagnosable Psychiatric Disorders (2019)

An estimated **70% of detained youth have at least one diagnosable psychiatric disorder** — compared with approximately 20% in the general population.



Source: Archives of General Psychiatry: "Psychiatric disorders in youth in juvenile detention."

"I had post-traumatic stress induced flashbacks to nights of doing things and being around violence, sometimes resulting in death within feet of me. I still think of the things I've done in my past. I've had people die in my arms from the violence. I've seen a lot of death and done stupid things, and I felt like I couldn't overcome it, knowing I was able to do that. I didn't have the skills or resources to forgive myself."

– Blake S.

In Their Own Words

"Working out helps me channel my anger. I can focus on movement to work through some things, and it has helped me cope."

– Edgard F.

"What has kept me away from the streets are things that kept me busy while incarcerated, like hobbies. I hope when other youth get let out they can find outlets like too and remain in a positive environment. It will help them not come back into the system."

– Andre S.

"Being in nature, like by the ocean or a river, helps me feel calm."

– Raquel P.

"The services I got, the advice, and the therapy prevented me from going down a wrong path and opened up a new beginning for me."

– Jayden L.

"I wish I had access to other forms of therapy and other forms of expression along with mentorship. That would have been helpful."

– Jamie G.

"We should be able to go outside to the field more to be in the sunlight. Right now it only happens once a month because of low staffing. Even people in prison get yard time every day."

– Colin P.

"The music studios are like therapy. We are not allowed to use bad words in our songs, but that's fine. It gives us a chance to be creative."

– Ray L.

"I've been finding myself through music and poetry. I also like to cook and go on hikes!"

– Edgard F.

"Every time I try to speak, they say let's evaluate you. I don't want to be evaluated. I'm telling you what is wrong with me. What is wrong with me is that I have nobody. What is wrong with me is that I have no food. What is wrong with me is that I have to make all this money, and I have to do all these things, and I have to be an adult at freaking 12 years old."

– Alexis J.

Steps Toward Recovery-Oriented Practices for Youth

Children and youth described how access to a recovery-oriented approach that prioritized autonomy, connection, and resilience allowed them to overcome and heal from adversity to build positive futures. Utilizing strengths-based interventions, recovery-oriented care focuses on building upon each young person's unique strengths, talents, and aspirations. By shifting the narrative from deficits to potential, systems can foster optimism, self-efficacy, and hope — key components of successful rehabilitation.[31]

Youth interviewed for this report highlighted approaches that would aid in their healing and positively impact their mental and physical health. By adopting these actionable steps, court and probation workers can address the root causes of youth involvement in the justice system and foster environments that prioritize healing over punishment. This will not only reduce recidivism, but lay the groundwork for healthier, more resilient communities.

1. Empower Youth Through Relatable and Experienced Providers

Youth consistently emphasize the need for providers who understand their lived experiences. Peer support specialists, mentors, and culturally competent clinicians can help establish that trust and create safe spaces for healing.[5] Engaging providers who share similar backgrounds or have extensive experience working with system-involved youth creates a foundation of trust and mutual respect. Programs involving relatable providers show reduced resistance to care, increased engagement, and long-term positive outcomes for youth.[34]

Youth also highlighted the need for consistency in their care. They frequently mentioned high rates of turnover in providers and that it often felt like a training ground for new, inexperienced clinicians to start before moving on to a new role. This high rate of turnover, coupled with the lack of quality care, led youth to experience feeling that they were not worth receiving quality care and having difficulty trusting the providers.

Building partnerships with community organizations to recruit trauma-informed, relatable providers with lived experience can help court systems and probation teams ensure that providers are equipped to recognize and affirm the strengths youth bring to their healing process.

Example: Los Angeles County's partnership with the Anti-Recidivism Coalition (ARC) has been a model for leveraging relatable providers. ARC staff, many of whom are formerly incarcerated, build trust and rapport with youth by sharing their stories of transformation, demonstrating that change is possible.

2. Involve Youth in Co-Creating Individualized Treatment Plans

Youth involved in the justice system have a deep understanding of their own needs and aspirations. They thrive when given a voice in their treatment and care. Collaborative, youth-led planning not only fosters engagement but also reinforces their sense of agency and self-worth. Being actively involved in the creation of their treatment plans was frequently cited as being a key factor in encouraging youth to want to participate in offered programming. Youth who participate in co-creating their treatment plans demonstrate higher levels of satisfaction with services, reduced recidivism, and improved behavioral health outcomes.[50]

Research also underscores the importance of self-determination in recovery. Collaborative treatment plans, developed with active input from youth, build autonomy and ensure care

aligns with their needs and goals.[18] Positive psychology findings further suggest that fostering a sense of agency enhances resilience and mental well-being, allowing youth to take ownership of their growth.[51]

System workers should establish co-creation practices where youth, their families, and care providers collaborate to design treatment plans that align with the youth's strengths, goals, and needs. By using participatory tools, such as strengths assessments, these collaborative teams can identify and celebrate the unique skills and aspirations of each youth.

Example: Sacramento County's Wraparound Services program engages youth and families in the co-creation of treatment plans, addressing not only behavioral health needs but also broader factors like education, housing, and community connections.

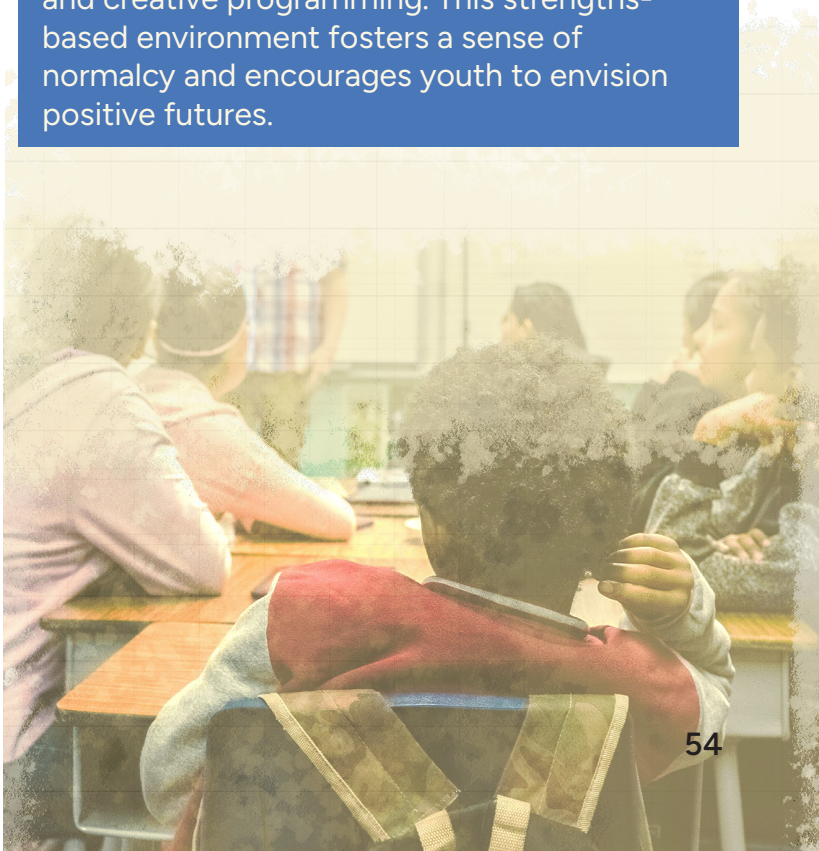
3. Redesign Spaces to Promote Holistic Wellness

Youth are capable of thriving in environments that affirm their humanity, creativity, and innate desire for connection. Children and youth across California have described how the designs of physical and social environments have profound implications on their mental and physical health.[52]

Facilities with holistic wellness designs see fewer behavioral incidents and higher levels of engagement in educational and rehabilitative programs.[53] Detention settings that provide access to nature, creative outlets, and physical activity harness the healing power of these elements, supporting both mental and physical wellness.

- **Access to Nature and Outdoor Spaces:** Exposure to natural environments reduces stress, improves mood, and supports emotional regulation. Incorporating outdoor areas and opportunities for sunlight can mitigate the harmful effects of confinement.[54]
- **Opportunities for Physical Activity:** Exercise is a proven intervention for reducing depression and anxiety while enhancing cognitive functioning. Facilities should include structured and unstructured exercise opportunities that cater to diverse interests and abilities. It's also important to remember that as physical activity increases, a young person's nutritional needs also need to change to support their new goals and behaviors. In some county facilities, protein shakes and other types of nutritional supplements can be considered contraband. Taking a holistic approach to the needs of the young person and identifying what can be done to support changing physical needs is an essential part of encouraging increased physical activity.
- **Creative and Reflective Spaces:** Art, music, and writing provide therapeutic outlets for self-expression and emotional processing. Ensuring consistent access to these spaces empowers youth to explore their identities and process their experiences constructively.

Example: San Mateo County's Youth Services Center integrates outdoor spaces, natural light, and creative programming. This strengths-based environment fosters a sense of normalcy and encourages youth to envision positive futures.



Reentry Support

Planning for reentry should begin the moment a youth enters the court system and must include providing children and youth with the support they need to be successful in this transition.

Proactively developing personalized reentry plans for children and youth ensures they spend as little time as possible within facilities, reduces gaps in care, prevents recidivism, and fosters long-term success.

The Stepping Home Model, developed by UCLA, provides a framework and standards to ensure the safe and successful transition for youth from an SYTF to their communities. Through the utilization of less restrictive placements, youth gradually increase their community involvement while working toward achieving their case plan goals.

The Stepping Home Model: Standards of Excellence

Developed by UCLA, these standards serve as the core values of the Stepping Home Model. They **promote healing and accountability for youth** who are dispositioned to SYTFs:

- The model adheres to research-informed practices that are **conducive to healing, accountability, and rehabilitation.**
- **The model prioritizes safety.**
- The model is fully resourced in the **best interest of the youth** and the community.

The children and youth interviewed discussed the critical importance of services that help with the transition back to their community. Services such as transitional housing, transportation, employment programming, the continuation of care, and establishing support networks can be provided and coordinated through partnerships with community-based organizations.

Transitional Housing provides a stable and secure environment where youth can rebuild their lives post-incarceration. Housing instability was discussed by youth as being a major barrier to their successful reentry, often leading to homelessness or environments that perpetuate criminal behavior. Safe housing gives youth a foundation to access other reentry resources and reduces the stress that may lead to risky behaviors.[55]

Transportation ensures access to essential services such as education, healthcare, and employment. Many of the youths interviewed said that a lack of reliable transportation was often a factor that led to their involvement in the court system. They said it hindered their ability to attend mandatory court appointments, treatment programs or job interviews when they were transitioning back into the community. Reliable transportation fosters independence and helps youth remain successful with reentry plans.[56]

Employment and Workforce Programming prepares youth for meaningful work by offering job training, and placement services. When thinking about their futures, the majority of youth discussed securing stable employment as a primary goal. Employment not only provides financial independence for youth but also a sense of purpose, reducing the likelihood of recidivism. Youth want to be provided with effective programming that combines vocational skills with life skills training to help them address broader challenges in professional settings.[57]

Continuation of Care involves ensuring that mental health, substance use treatment, and other healthcare services initiated during incarceration are sustained post-release. Many youth involved in the justice system experience trauma, mental health disorders, or substance abuse, which, if untreated, increase the risk of reoffending. Coordinated care bridges the gap between facility-based and community-based services, promoting continuity and stability.[58]

A Support Network of family, mentors, and community organizations provides emotional, social, and practical support. Youth discussed how having a supportive community available for them during reentry made them feel more connected and motivated to make positive choices. Family engagement, in particular, has been shown to enhance reentry outcomes by fostering trust and communication.[59]

California is the first state in the nation approved to provide a set of **Medicaid services to youth** in correctional facilities for up to 90 days prior to release. This coordinated community reentry process **assists youth reentering the community in getting connected to the physical and behavioral health services,** including prescription medications, they need prior to release, ensuring the continuity of care.

"One of the most important things is resources when you're out. I remember when, after I spent eight months in the hall, I had nowhere to go. I had no money in my pocket and no food on my table. It would be nice if after you serve your time you're actually given resources. Something that sets you up to be good for at least a month after you're out."

– Alexis J.

Enrichment Activities & Life Skills Development

> **Young people in the justice system often lack access to the everyday experiences that help build confidence, social skills, and practical knowledge for adult life.**

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's juvenile justice research demonstrates that enrichment activities — from learning to grocery shop and cook healthy meals to participating in arts programs and team sports — play a crucial role in rehabilitation. These activities aren't field trips — they're essential tools for building the confidence and competence young people need to succeed.

Imagine being placed in a secure youth treatment facility as a young teenager and being released in your early twenties. Not only has the world changed drastically during that time, but so has the world's expectations of you because you reentered the community as a young adult. Basic activities that many take for granted — public transportation, using a debit card, shopping for groceries, scanning a QR code, or using a touch screen to order at a restaurant — can feel overwhelming without practice.

When young people have opportunities to learn these skills in supportive environments, they're better prepared for independent living. Research from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention shows that youth involved in the justice system who participate in comprehensive life skills programs are 60% more likely to be employed or in school one year after release compared to those who don't receive this training.[50]

Structured enrichment activities do more than teach practical skills — they help young people develop crucial social and emotional capabilities. Sports programs, arts activities, and group outings provide opportunities to practice teamwork, emotional regulation, and problem-solving in real-world settings. A long-term study by the National Institute of Justice found that youth involved in the justice system who participated in regular enrichment activities showed significant improvements in self-regulation, positive peer relationships, and future orientation.

> *"Youth need to be the lead in creating their plan, or they're not going to follow through on it. They're not going to want to do it. But then actually knowing how it's going to look, and actually having experience in the community before they're released is huge for reentry, too."*
>
> ***– Young Women's Freedom Center***

"Every Youth Deserves to Be Heard"

Involving children and youth in decision-making processes is critical to creating a fair and effective youth justice system.

Youth bring invaluable lived experiences that provide unique insights into their needs, challenges, and goals. They are the most knowledgeable about the root causes of their behavior and the barriers they face in navigating the system. **Involving children and youth in the design of their rehabilitation plans, the system acknowledges their expertise, leading to interventions that are more personalized and effective.**

Children and youth are more likely to feel connected to programs when they have a say in shaping them. For example, a young person struggling with anxiety may suggest that mindfulness practices would complement traditional therapy, or a youth with a passion for art might find creative outlets more engaging than other forms of skill-building. When these preferences are incorporated, youth are more likely to participate fully, feel valued, and experience meaningful progress.[40]

Giving youth a voice helps counteract the sense of powerlessness that often accompanies system involvement. This empowerment fosters a sense of control and autonomy, which is particularly important during adolescence.[60]

Self-Determination and Development

From a developmental perspective, self-determination is essential to fostering resilience and positive outcomes for youth involved in the justice system. **Adolescents thrive when they are given opportunities to make decisions and learn from the consequences in a supportive environment.** Systems that foster self-determination, such as those that include youth in decision-making processes and provide mentorship opportunities, are far more effective in promoting long-term behavioral change.[18]

When youth are actively engaged in decisions about their rehabilitation plans, they learn critical life skills, such as goal setting, problem-solving, and collaboration. These skills not only aid in their rehabilitation but also prepare them for success beyond the justice system. These opportunities helped youth build the confidence and belief in themselves that they are capable of taking responsibility for their actions and can make positive changes in their lives.

Youth Participation in Facility and System-Level Changes

Beyond individual plans, the youth who are not diverted should be included in shaping the environments of the facilities where they reside and influencing broader policy changes. Facilities that involve youth in decisions about their operations — such as recreational activities, meal planning, or conflict resolution processes — create spaces that feel respectful and responsive. **When youth were able to see that their opinions mattered, they were more likely to engage constructively and view the facility as a place of growth rather than punishment.**

On a systemic level, incorporating the voices of children and youth who have experienced the court system is crucial. Justice reform initiatives often overlook the perspectives of the very individuals they aim to serve. Incorporating youth input ensures that reforms reflect lived realities and address flaws in policies and practices that may perpetuate inequities or fail to address the real needs of those in the system.

For instance, children and youth who have experienced extended periods in detention highlighted the psychological toll of isolation and the need for more family engagement. Such feedback can be used to inform policies that prioritize behavioral health supports, family reunification efforts, or educational opportunities.

The critical perspective of these children and youth can shed light on systemic biases, such as racial or socioeconomic disparities, prompting the development of more equitable practices.

Building Trust and Long-Term Engagement

Children and youth being involved in decision-making processes helped to strengthen trust between them and the justice system. Many of these children entered the justice system with significant distrust of authority, often stemming from experiences of marginalization or discrimination. By including them as partners in their own rehabilitation and in system reform efforts, the justice system demonstrates a commitment to fairness, respect, and collaboration.

Furthermore, youth who were able to participate in system-level changes felt a sense of civic engagement and social responsibility. When youth see that their insights can lead to tangible improvements, they are more likely to remain involved in advocacy and reform efforts, becoming agents of change within their communities.

"The system as it is set up right now, we have judges and probation officers making decisions for youth. These people are not taking the time to ask them what their dreams or strengths are, they make decisions for our youth that are one-size-fits-all. That's not gonna work. There's individuality here. We need wraparound services specific to the youths' needs. If youth are decision-makers in their case plan and in their community services, they'll be more apt to abide by it."

– Mia D.

"Painting a mural that people don't like doesn't make sense when we only have one therapist and we don't have access to programs that would actually help."

– Colin P.

Incorporating Youth Into Decision-Making Processes

Professionals in the court system can take intentional steps to incorporate youth involved in the justice system into programming, facility environment decisions, and system-level policy changes. By partnering with community-based organizations, these efforts can be enriched and made more effective. Below are actionable recommendations from youth and backed by evidence-based best practices:

1. Foster a Culture of Inclusion and Respect

- **Create safe spaces for youth participation:** Establish forums or advisory boards where youth can share their experiences and suggestions without fear of judgment or reprisal.
- **Train staff in youth engagement:** Provide training to court officials, caseworkers, and facility staff on trauma-informed practices and communication strategies to encourage youth involvement.
- **Demonstrate respect for youth expertise:** Acknowledge and validate the lived experiences of youth, framing them as partners rather than subjects.

2. Involve Youth in Individualized Programming Decisions

- **Use collaborative treatment planning:** Involve youth in setting goals for their rehabilitation plans. Use motivational interviewing techniques to understand their priorities and preferences.
- **Provide options and choices:** Offer a variety of program types — such as vocational training, art therapy, or community service — so youth can select what resonates with them.
- **Ensure consistent check-ins:** Regularly meet with youth to revisit and adjust their plans as they progress or as their needs change.

3. Integrate Youth Voices in Facility Environment Decisions

- **Establish youth councils within facilities:** Form committees that allow youth residents to provide input on daily life aspects, such as recreation, meal options, or the design of common areas.
- **Conduct regular surveys or focus groups:** Use these tools to gather feedback on what changes would improve the facility environment and implement feasible suggestions.
- **Invite youth participation in conflict resolution:** Train youth in peer mediation programs to empower them to contribute to creating a more peaceful environment.

4. Collaborate With Youth on System-Level Policy Changes

- **Create youth advisory boards:** Assemble diverse groups of youth with court system experience to provide feedback on proposed policies and advocate for reforms.
- **Host public forums and listening sessions:** Invite youth and their families to share their experiences and suggestions with court officials and stakeholders.
- **Engage youth in legislative advocacy:** Work with community-based organizations to train youth in advocacy skills so they can contribute to policy discussions at local, state, and federal levels.

5. Celebrate Youth Impact

- **Track progress and outcomes:** Use data to evaluate how youth participation influences programming effectiveness, facility improvements, and policy reforms.
- **Share success stories:** Highlight examples of youth contributions leading to meaningful changes to inspire continued engagement and system-wide adoption.
- **Acknowledge youth efforts:** Recognize and celebrate youth involvement through awards, public acknowledgments, or personal feedback to reinforce the value of their input.

6. Address Barriers to Participation

- **Ensure accessibility:** Provide transportation, child care, or virtual participation options to remove logistical obstacles for youth and their families.
- **Simplify legal language:** Use clear and youth-friendly language when discussing programs, policies, or rights that make legal information more accessible.
- **Build long-term support networks:** Work with CBOs to establish youth leadership programs and peer support groups that help youth sustain their involvement over time.

> *"Every youth deserves to be heard whether they committed a crime or not. Every youth deserves to be valued and celebrated."*
>
> ***– Kayla C.***

Closing

Every young person deserves the chance to thrive, regardless of their past.

Providing youth who have experienced incarceration with equal access to opportunities is essential to creating a just and equitable society. Incarceration often stems from systemic inequities, trauma, and lack of support, and continuing to deny these children and youth access to education, employment, and community resources perpetuates cycles of poverty and recidivism. By investing in the futures of these young people, we affirm their potential and humanity.

Access to opportunities such as mentorship programs, vocational training, and higher education empowers youth to rebuild their lives, contribute positively to their communities, and achieve their dreams. Treating all children and youth as individuals with potential, rather than solely by their past mistakes, helps break down the stigma and cycle of justice system involvement and fosters rehabilitation.

Equity in opportunity reduces the likelihood of reoffending, saves public resources, and creates safer communities. Denying children and youth access only isolates them further, reinforcing barriers that prevent their success. Adopting a restorative approach that prioritizes support over punishment ensures that all youth — regardless of their history — can build meaningful, productive lives. In doing so, we not only uplift them but also invest in a brighter, more inclusive future for everyone.

Conclusion

Each time a young person enters the justice system, it presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Whether as professionals working in the system, or caring adults in the lives of youth, we can have an impact. How we will intervene impacts not just the life of the young person in front of us, but their families and, ultimately, our communities.

> **These children and youth aren't statistics on a page; they're members of our communities with dreams, talents, and the capacity for remarkable transformation.**

We've heard their stories throughout this report: stories of survival, resilience, and hope. Stories of young people who, when given the right support, went from survival mode to college classrooms, from trauma to transformation, from feeling hopeless to helping others.

We know what works. Children and youth are telling us what they need and research supports them. When we invest in accountability, support, and healing rather than punishment, youth become contributors to community safety rather than threats to it. They become mentors, leaders, and community members who create ripples of positive change extending far beyond their single case. Each young person who transforms their life helps break cycles of harm that can persist for generations.

The transformation from a system built on punishment into one centered on healing does not have to wait — the laws and policies already exist. This transformation can start today with your next decision, your next interaction. It starts with taking the time to truly listen to what children and youth say they need, and then becoming a champion for those changes.

Every decision to prioritize healing over punishment, every effort to advocate for rehabilitation resources, every choice to view these children and youth through the lens of their potential instead of their past decisions are the building blocks of transformation.

The children and youth in our system will return to their communities. The only question is whether they'll return traumatized or transformed. That outcome doesn't rest on their shoulders — it rests on the choices we make today and every day moving forward.

"What do I want system workers to know? I want them to focus on the idea that the proper formula, the proper programs, the proper structure — if done right, it can result in positive change. We are a very powerful country, and we have a lot of resources compared to other countries, and I feel like we need to best utilize them to give better results for our people. I just want everyone to focus on positive change."

– Luke S.

Throughout my career, I have worked with families in crisis within the justice system. I began as a deputy district attorney representing abused and neglected children in Dependency Court and prosecuting crimes against children. I then served as a superior court commissioner in Dependency Court and later as a superior court judge, specializing in problem-solving court systems for children and families in Family Court, Dependency Court, and Juvenile Justice Court. Now, as the Director of California's first statewide government office dedicated to youth justice policy and best practices, I continue engaging with families and youth impacted by the Youth Justice System. In every role, I have prioritized the voices of children and youth in decision-making.

I have never given up on our youth — just as I would never give up on my own children. No matter what. This report seeks to shine a light on those often ignored, to listen to those silenced, and to support those labeled as dangerous, unlovable, or beyond redemption. It places the youth voice front and center. We took the time and resources to hear directly from youth who have been incarcerated, asking them to share their stories and tell us how the system can improve.

Too often, we only hear about the youth who reoffend after release — held up as an example and used as justification for why we should be tough on youth crime, lock them up, and throw away the key. But these cases are the exception, not the rule.

I am here to tell you that those are the outliers. Many youth, given the right support in custody and upon reentry, succeed. This report is based on interviews with over 100 formerly incarcerated youth who transformed their lives. Their stories represent just a fraction of the many successes we have come to know.

As a judge, I saw thousands of children and youth come through the system, and 99% wanted to do better. Many even asked me directly for guidance and support to live a better life. I saw children who were brilliant, talented, and eager to contribute to society rather than be seen as burdens. That's why I always made a point of asking.

There is one thing I know for sure: All kids, even ones that have made bad decisions, can change their lives for the better if they have the resources and access to do so. I also know that investing in rehabilitation for youth who find themselves in the justice system is not just the right thing to do; it also creates safer communities for all of us.

JUDGE KATHERINE LUCERO (RET.), DIRECTOR
Office of Youth and Community Restoration

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Appendix

This report was developed by The Social Changery based on the key themes that emerged following conversations with over 100 individuals who experienced incarceration as youth. Additional insights were provided through key informant interviews with youth-serving community-based organizations and system workers. The supporting narrative was developed through the systematic review of peer-reviewed research and evidence-based best practices.

The following Changery team members contributed to the development of this report: Dayna Barrios, MA; Riley Casentini; Noelani Dennis; Emily Gerofsky, MPH; Nicole Jarred; Lisa Smusz, MS, LPCC; Montana Weekes.

Story Collection:
The Social Changery partnered with a diverse group of community-based organizations throughout California to collect the stories of young people who have experienced the youth justice system. The organizations were provided with a discussion guide and given direction to adapt the questions as needed based on the characteristics of the youth they serve. Organizations were given the option to hold group listening sessions or one-on-one interviews and funding to provide stipends for all youth participants.

Anti-Recidivism Coalition (ARC)
The Anti-Recidivism Coalition (ARC) works to end mass incarceration in California. To ensure communities are safe, healthy, and whole, ARC empowers formerly and currently incarcerated people to thrive by providing a support network, comprehensive reentry services and opportunities to advocate for policy change. ARC conducted two focus group sessions with young adults who have experienced the youth justice system. One focus group was held in Los Angeles and one in Sacramento. ARC conducted an additional focus group with their credible messenger staff, all of which experienced incarceration as youth or young adults. Sessions were recorded and the written notes were provided after all identifying information was removed.

Bay Area Creative (BAC)
Bay Area Creative is a team of artists who use spoken word to transform lives, communities, and the globe. Their team conducted one-on-one conversations with 15 individuals who are currently experiencing incarceration within a secure facility. Notes were taken during the conversations and were provided after all identifying information was removed.

California Youth Connection (CYC)
CYC is a dynamic and impactful nonprofit organization that develops and grows leaders who empower each other and communities to transform the foster care and intersecting systems through community-led organizing, legislative, policy, and practice change. Their organization held individual conversations with 10 young people who have experienced incarceration. Conversations were recorded and the transcription of the audio was provided after all identifying information was removed.

Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ)
CURYJ (pronounced "courage") unlocks the leadership of young people to dream beyond bars, looking to them to lead the way in transforming communities by investing in their healing, aspirations, and activism. We partnered with their organization for a key informational interview with their staff and shared stories previously collected from youth who had experienced incarceration.

Fresh Lifelines for Youth (FLY)
FLY's programs connect young people with positive mentors and role models, promote their understanding of the law and their rights, and support them to become leaders among their peers and in their communities. FLY conducted one-on-one conversations with six individuals who experienced incarceration. Conversations were recorded and a transcription of the audio was provided after all identifying information was removed.

Healing Dialogue and Action
Healing Dialogue and Action brings together people wounded by violence and broken criminal justice systems. They share stories and listen deeply with open hearts. We partnered with their organization for a key informational interview with their staff to better understand the restorative justice process.

Native Dads Network
Native Dads Network's purpose is to protect and restore the indigenous family structure through culture, education, and intergenerational healing. We partnered with their organization to conduct one-on-one conversations with 13 individuals who had experienced incarceration. Conversations were recorded and the audio transcription was provided after all identifying information was removed.

Project Rebound: Humboldt
Project Rebound offers a life-affirming alternative to the school-to-prison pipeline and the revolving door of mass incarceration. This special admissions program, managed by formerly incarcerated individuals, is designed for students who have been "system-impacted." We partnered with their organization to conduct one-on-one conversations with three individuals who were experiencing incarceration. Written stories were provided with all identifying information removed.

Young Women's Freedom Center
The Young Women's Freedom Center provides fiscal sponsorship, operational support, coaching, and training for projects that center systems-impacted women, girls, and trans people of all genders with the primary purpose to inspire and empower young women who have been involved in the juvenile justice system, criminal justice system, and/or the underground street economy to create a positive change in their lives and communities. Their organization hosted a listening session with five individuals who had experienced incarceration. Conversations were recorded and a transcription of the audio was provided after all identifying information was removed.

Youth Participant Demographics:

Through these partnerships, The Social Changery was able to collect stories from a diverse group representative of the population of youth who experience incarceration.

Race/Ethnicities:

- AAPI
- Black / African American
- Non-Hispanic white
- Latino/a/x or Hispanic
- Native

Gender Identities:

- Genderqueer/Gender Nonconforming
- Male/Man/Cisgender Man
- Female/Woman/Cisgender Woman

Sexual Orientations:

- Queer
- Bisexual
- Lesbian
- Gay
- Heterosexual

Types of System Engagement / Experiences:

- Secure Youth Treatment Facility
- Department of Juvenile Justice
- Camp / Ranch
- Group Homes
- Probation
- Diversion
- Restorative Justice

California Regions:

- Bay Area
- Central Valley
- San Diego
- Los Angeles
- Far North