



OJJDP FY 2022 Virtual Town Hall With Youth

August 11, 2022 | 2–4 p.m. ET

Breakout Room 1 Notes

1. What are your thoughts on the juvenile justice system, in your own words?

- In my experience, the system is confusing and draining. There is more of a focus on punishment than support. I feel like people get used to being punished and that is not good for individuals' mental health. The environment in facilities is hectic and there is no room for improvement. If you make suggestions to staff, you are treated like you're telling them how to do their jobs, so I would say it is also closed minded.
- I have mixed feelings. There can be good outcomes for some people, but not for everyone. I was able to connect with a mentor who helped me greatly, but not everyone has that opportunity. It can be negative for someone who doesn't take advantage of opportunities. So, I have mixed feelings about the system.
- I think there are great opportunities for kids who need to be put back on the right track. Kids need structure, access to treatment, and guidance. I feel like kids in the juvenile justice system haven't had positive supports in their life. Sometimes the system can provide those supports.
- The juvenile justice system continues historical and generational trauma for the folks that it impacts directly and indirectly. The positive and restorative practices need to be solidified and focused to be truly effective for underserved young people and communities.
- I haven't really had much experience that I can remember with the juvenile justice system.
- I also have mixed feelings. It can be good for some, but it also has bad consequences that can affect people for a long time. I think the overall goal is to help youth, but it turns into something else. The youth's voices go unheard. Some are mistreated. I think there are pros and cons, but right now, I feel like the system fails youth.
- I think it can be good but just like with anything, you must take it with a grain of salt. Youth can get institutionalized. I think when there are staff who care about the youth and are not just there for a paycheck, there can be positive outcomes. When you invest in the youth, you get the greatest return.
- I feel like it can be good once they really start to support the youth's needs.
- The system disproportionately impacts youth of color and those of lower socioeconomic status.

a. What kinds of things should be changed?

- I think there needs to be more training for staff and mentors so they understand the impact they can have on youth.
- I agree with training for mentors, even if they have lived experience. Everyone's trauma is different. I also think we need to address the jail/prison mindset. Many kids act like it's normal or OK. And when they return to the community where there is a lack of stability, they are more likely to reoffend because they do not think being incarcerated is a big deal.
- I haven't had enough experience to say what should be changed.
- I think change needs to happen in the community. I think kids return to the community without guidance or supervision. They lack positive leadership and can't find positive ways to spend their time. I think they get bored and bad things happen. Youth need to connect to positive peer



groups in the community. They need support with housing and basic needs, so they don't have to fend for themselves.

- I would say more access to education, recreation, and community development. In [location], there are not a lot of supports at school. Without education, there is nothing. More community development for safe supports is needed. I think more child-parent interaction programming would be helpful.
- Funding available for community resources and options for alternatives to detention.
- Internships or certifications as ways to meet the financial responsibilities incurred by the juvenile justice system. One shouldn't have to sacrifice freedom for support.
- Access to therapy and mental health.
- Mental health services need to be available to families and youth.
- I think more access to mental health support and career development should be available in the system.
- Also, more access to mentors who have lived experience. I have had some good mentors without lived experience, but it is helpful to have someone who has had similar experiences.
- Trust and rapport are shared through common experiences and understanding is important.
- I want them to have more funding toward programs that can prevent youth from getting arrested. (Funding more restorative justice and diversion programs.) Having a plan after discharge, especially for housing. Instead of not having a suitable place for them to go. Having more trainings for staff who work with youth depending on the environment (e.g., child development trainings, trauma training, and adolescent development training).

b. Instead of sending kids to detention facilities, what other ideas do you have for kids who get into trouble with the law?

- The system should be more open to connecting kids with counselors and mentors in the community. Going to jail doesn't help the individual or the community. I think it would be better for everyone if people had guidance in their community to help guide them to make better decisions.
- In [location], there is a program called [Physical Activity Leaders \(PAL\)](#) that allows youth who have been involved in the system to get jobs as paid mentors. The police explorers help out in the community and have weekly meetings to talk about the positive impacts they have in their community.
- I think we need more activities in the community to keep kids out of trouble. I think we should encourage youth to get involved in activities (sports, music, art). I think money should be provided to communities so all youth can participate in different activities. I also think it needs to be easier to find jobs. We shouldn't have to jump through flaming hoops to get a job.
- I see a need for more community-based programs and transition support. When youth leave a facility, they may be required to participate in court-ordered treatment and other conditions of release. But often there are barriers that prevent youth from being able to meet their conditions, and they end up back in the facility. I think there is a need for people in the community to support people during their transition.
- Increase funding for extracurricular activities for all kids. There needs to be better sharing of resources available among all agencies that work with youth. I serve on a committee and hear the government officials asking why no one is using these programs. If the money for these programs is not used, they will stop funding the programs.



- Kids need counselors to connect them with resources in their community. If I did not have the support of my counselor, I would not have known how to enroll in college.
- I think community-based services need to be prioritized. Youth should be encouraged to participate in more extracurricular activities.
- Expand the types of programs available. As the gatekeeper, probation often recommends the same programs that might not meet the needs of the youth.
- The only books available in detention facilities are street books. There aren't any books that give a different outlook on life or anything to help you. The books have the same messages you hear on the streets.

c. In what ways can communities get involved in helping kids stay out of the juvenile justice system?

- I have said it before, but I think guidance and support in the community is important. I think it would be helpful to provide more transition support that starts before the youth exits a facility and continues while in the community. Possible volunteers to help with wraparound services.
- I think more mentoring programs. Youth involved in more community activities like sports or clubs.
- I think programs that build relationships between youth and police officers through sports or other activities they both enjoy are helpful. I think youth need things to do so they are not staying home all day.
- Distance delinquency from imprisonment.
- The mindset that law enforcement has toward young delinquents, they view them like they are going to grow up to be criminals. It is not normal for people that are supposed to be helping youth to have a negative attitude about them. Their mindset needs to change so they treat them better and not like future criminals.
- Increase funding for community-based programs.
- Investing in community-based organizations. Promote more educational programs and encourage kids to participate in activities outside of their comfort zone. Increase access to parent and child interaction programs. Fund more youth advocates.
- I think promoting employment opportunities as part of the transition process is important. I think it would be helpful to connect youth to employment opportunities before they exit a facility so there is a job lined up for them when they return to the community.
- Staff need to take the time to truly listen and understand the specific needs of the youth they serve.
- Change the mindset of the community that these kids are bad and will continue to commit crimes.

d. In what ways can families get involved in helping kids stay out of the juvenile justice system?

- Families need to be more invested in their child. Families need to do more than just help with schoolwork but also fun activities.
- I agree, parents and families should motivate and support youth. Show them that you care. Building closer bonds in families would motivate kids to do better.
- I know being a parent is tough. I think parents being investing no matter what support kids' interests. I think sometimes parents have a "it's my way or the highway" mentality that makes kids feel like their parents don't care.



- Program operators should also take account of negative family situations.
- I don't think there is a specific silver bullet response. Especially because most of the system-involved youth have families going through complicated issues. I think families need to never give up and support youth. They need to take time to listen to youth. I agree a community navigator to assist with transition and reentry would be helpful.
- I think families need to be there for kids. They need to teach them what is right and wrong. I think just being there with positive support is important. Families can help teach kids life skills.

2. What kinds of opportunities would be helpful for kids when they go back to their communities after being involved in the juvenile justice system?

- I think mentorship and employment opportunities for kids are needed. I feel like if I did not have a mentor, I would have gone right back to the streets. I think youth need mentors in the community to provide guidance and a job lined up for them when they return to the community.
- I think employment opportunities are important. In addition, supports to help youth connect to employment and education programs in the community. Sometimes, there are opportunities, but youth do not know about them or need help to access them.
- I agree more jobs, paid internships, certification, and employment opportunities. I think kids need family support and mentorship. I also think more outlets for kids to express themselves like art, sports, or writing programs.
- More opportunities to connect youth with others that might be going through similar things, or peer navigators to help meet probation or release conditions.
- Kids need positive activities to fill their free time. More job training and options for kids who do not want to attend college are needed. Youth need mentors and peer supports to help them stay on track.
- I agree. Programs that provide funding for kids to participate in summer programs are needed. These programs should also include paid internships and life skills development.

a. What opportunities would be helpful for kids who are currently involved in the juvenile justice system?

- Create as many opportunities as possible, including vocational programs, college, and high school equivalency.
- I would say jobs, internships, opportunities for skill building, and volunteering. Anything to focus on something you might never do.
- Follow up and communication letting them know someone is there for them, even when things are going well.

3. A lot of kids that end up in the juvenile justice system are also involved in other systems, like the education system for issues at school, or the mental health system because of court-appointed therapy, or the child welfare system and they are currently in between foster homes. What ideas do you have for improving communication and collaboration among these agencies to better serve kids?



- I think I said this before, but more community supports. Kids need someone to talk to who can provide guidance and healing support. Youth need to create positive bonds with people in their community.
- The system creates barriers to success.
- Introducing intermediates for support. Sometimes, families and youth feel judged or misunderstood. Have a neutral resource to meet responsibilities or communicate with the care team. Often entities work in silos and don't communicate on the immediate needs effectively.
- I think communication and collaboration between agencies is key. I think the foster system is an issue.
- I agree, the foster system is infamous for being unstable. I think a stable figure is needed, like a social worker or mentor.
- I agree there is a lot of overlap. Youth are in critical danger. They need food and housing. I think a more holistic approach is needed. Maybe assigning a social worker to youth to make sure their needs are met would help prevent further system involvement.

4. If you were to offer training to juvenile justice staff (probation officers, parole officers, law enforcement, court attorneys, judges, etc.) during your system involvement, what would the focus of your training be?

- I think the justice system makes you feel like an animal, like you are not a real person. Staff need to be more compassionate and have empathy for youth. They need to put themselves in the youth's shoes. How would they feel in the same situation?
- Teach them about positive communications. They need to understand their words are powerful and understand the potential impact of their words. I also think confidentiality can be issues. People need to know what information to share and with whom. While it can be beneficial to share information between agencies, I had my information shared with people who did not need to have it, and that had negative consequences.
- I think there needs to be more training on de-escalation without physical contact.
- Provide positive and healing support.
- I might be a jaded, but I do not think the mindset of these folks can be changed. In a perfect world, I hope for increased culturally appropriate understanding or education.
- I think they need to treat kids like kids. We know brain development doesn't end until age 25. This should be considered when making sentencing decisions.
- Ask people why they committed the crime. Understand what is going on in their lives and provide support to address those issues. People just want to be able to chase their dreams. Show them their dreams are attainable.

Breakout Room 2 Notes

1. What are your thoughts on the juvenile justice system, in your own words?

a. What kinds of things should be changed?

- The juvenile detention system is a little more lenient in [state] than other states. The police are a little more lenient. It's more in [other locations] where there is police brutality. I also feel like it's because the police are not really doing their job all the way. There is something crooked



about the cops. The juvenile system is not OK for POC [(persons of color)] youth. The majority cities are harsher on their youth. Sometimes, you have to lock them up before they get any worse. What should change are some of the charges. They need to be more realistic. Sometimes it's not even that deep, but they're going to throw it at you because of where you caught the charge and how you got the charge and who you were with.

- We look at the symptoms and not the cause. There is a lack of resources for a child and there's nothing else for them to do, so they lean to the wrong friends or gangs. It's not always the individual's or the juvenile's fault. If you provide incentives and different programs, that would be great. So, really looking at the whole picture.
- I know a lot of things happen not because of the individual themselves, but because of what the individual went through. But sometimes we have to be a little realistic. Like the Parkland [FL] shooter—they need to give it to him. Sometimes you have to give them the “real world.” You're not going to be a baby forever. You can't keep doing this.
- That balance is difficult. How do you hold them accountable while at the same time not just punishing them?
- In [state], there are highly discriminatory laws for convicted felons. Even for a crime that is 10 years old, it can still be hard to find housing or to be able to equitably access resources that you need to be successful. If you have a felony, it doesn't matter if it's drug related, if it's property damage related—whatever it is, it bars you from certain social safety programs that are essential for you to be successful. We have a very historical lens of “if you do the crime, you do the time,” but in reality, when we talk about kids, if the only thing Johnny down the road knows is drugs and gangs and how to sell dope to provide for his family, how are we benefiting him by locking him away? We're not creating any form of change. We're just adding to that cyclical oppression that has been historically created in our most marginalized communities. I would like to see there be more funding for youth who are tried as adults because the reality is until they start their term on their adult felony probation or adult probation, they're not eligible for Bureau of Prisons funding. So, if it takes 90 days for them to get funding, and they don't have a 90-day supply of medication, we're creating huge gaps in the system that are essentially designed to make these kids fail.
- That is true. Another issue is we don't have enough empathetic people. A lot of things that happen, it requires empathy. They just want a check. They don't want to put their heart into it. Why would you give a child the book for trying to defend themselves and provide for themselves? The balance is not there. We need to be careful who we hire. We are hiring the nastiest people for the most important jobs these days.
- I just want to relate. Especially with COVID and everyone getting sick and schools closing. A lot of kids were dropping out and we didn't really have that school experience. And people are going the wrong way. A lot of us work and choose work over school. A lot of people don't see the good side—that there are people who can help you out. We need programs like this. You have to take care of yourself and get your education and have the right mindset. Kids don't have role models and they have to work to keep their family stable. I'm glad you are reaching out to help kids.

2. What can OJJDP do differently to prevent kids from entering the juvenile justice system?

- a. **Instead of sending kids to detention facilities, what other ideas do you have for kids who get into trouble with the law?**



- We can create a hangout spot on Facebook, for example. Or you can be a tutor. Something to keep you not confined, but you'll be there doing some sort of work. More healing focused and more resource focused.
- Having access to behavior health services before you are in the system. When you are in a trauma mindset, you're not thinking, "How are my actions affecting someone else?" It's not fair to punish somebody for their actions when they're in survival mode, because your brain is like it's being attacked 24/7. So, I wish that there was more culturally competent and affordable behavioral health access for communities. Especially in our POC communities. Our families think it's the devil. We need to have more conversations about that in the house. Communities need those services.
- I would like to see OJJDP really advocate and endorse an expansion and addition to the core protections for states that apply for Title II funds. I want to see a push on the expungement process and on creating equitable opportunities for youth. And more community-style corrections. Using nonprofits and grassroots organizations. If you look at the wages, the minimum wage is \$7.25 in most states. There is nowhere in America you can work on that salary and house yourself. You would need to work 100 hours a week just to meet rent. It's even harder if you have to pay restitution. Or pay for medications. That can be almost \$200 a month out of pocket.
- I would love to see there be more equitable opportunities for you after you come out. State and federal policies prevent people with felonies from getting better. For example, if you have a felony, you can't get a scuba diver license or it's very difficult to get a cosmetology license. Even if your felony has nothing to do with personal injury or anything related to that. These policies are highly detrimental to the rehabilitation process. Maybe they want to be an electrician or plumber, but they can't do it because they have felonies. I would also love to see family engagement included in the core protections. We need cultural competency training. As a convicted person, I have to try 100 times harder to get equitable resources. We could provide them vouchers for clothing or the same vouchers for clothing or daycare that we provide foster families. We would create opportunities where these families could succeed.
- Sometimes, it's like the systems that are meant to protect us hurt us the most, and it's unfortunately policy at all different levels: local, state, national.

b. In what ways can communities get involved in helping kids stay out of the juvenile justice system?

- A lot of these kids, they don't have anyone to go through. Their gang is their family. Instead of going to their family, they don't. Instead, they go to a gang. Also, it doesn't give them a chance to provide for themselves. They feel like, "I've already screwed up my life, how am I going to continue?" There should be more options. Somewhere they can do something they love. All they have to do is keep their grades up or stop getting into trouble. Then, they will think, at least if I stay out of trouble, I have something to look forward to. They need connections, so that can help them get connections and help them build themselves back up. Sometimes, people don't want to do that, and they just give up and just pursue that lifestyle.
- Hold an "adopt a mentor" event. You could speak to them and see what kind of mentorship they could give you. Like a social kind of event. Also, a competition in agricultural communities to see who can produce the most produce. Something fun to keep the people and the community engaged.



- The important people in the conversation should get involved. I want to really be able to do something, but I really need the help that I'm asking for. We need actual support from the important people in the conversation. We don't want to sit here and just talk, and you don't do anything. Just don't sit around and listen. We need your help. Reach out and send help. Make actual change. Help me make actual change. You know more than I do. Be my mentor. Make connections.
- Our community has historically been disenfranchised, marginalized, and abused. It makes it very difficult for us to have these conversations to bring about the resources that we need. So now there's a huge distrust with anybody related to law enforcement—whether you're a juvenile justice specialist, whether you're a prosecuting attorney, whether you're a public defender. If you're just saying, "I want to help," that only goes so far. When we talk about reform, we don't talk enough about the relationships that go into it, like how you build and develop those relationships. And when we talk about community resources and creating them, not every community is financially equitable. Also, a lot of the youth don't have the time to be able to go to a safe space because they have to help their caregiver, or they *are* the primary caregiver. It's great if we have free alternatives for something like a community or crisis center where kids could go from 5 to 8 p.m. and get a free meal and do arts and crafts, but a lot of these kids don't have that opportunity. You can't bring a 2-year-old when you're 15 and taking care of your younger sibling. And a lot of our communities lack the infrastructure. So that even if there are key resources available, they're not easy to get to.

c. In what ways can families get involved in helping kids stay out of the juvenile justice system?

- We don't realize how we have created an environment where it is very difficult for families to engage. When we do have families that want to be engaged, they have to sacrifice to make that work. For a parent to be part of that, they have to take time off work, and if they have to travel, that's an additional expense. If we are taking youth outside their communities, we can provide gas vouchers or a bus pass, but they are still missing 6 hours of work. There are a lot of barriers to family engagement that we don't realize. And sometimes it's done wrong. Like they bring families in, and it causes more issues.
- Families are criminalized in the system. Families are often seen as the problem and that's why they are not engaged.

3. What kinds of opportunities would be helpful for kids when they go back to their communities after being involved in the juvenile justice system?

a. What opportunities would be helpful for kids who are currently involved in the juvenile justice system?

- In general, if there was a way for there to be a de facto expungement process for juveniles, it would make it a lot easier. If you apply for a state position where you're working under the Department of Corrections or you're working as a social worker for the Department of Health and Welfare, those are federal checks, so they have access to your juvenile records, and if you have those records, that disproportionately affects your ability to equitably compete in the job market. In [state] it's 100 percent perfectly legal to use a juvenile's time or history of crime against them when factoring housing, even if they're not the ones applying for housing.
- It's hard because I found out the records stay with you.



4. If you were to offer training to juvenile justice staff (probation officers, parole officers, law enforcement, court attorneys, judges, etc.) during your system involvement, what would the focus of your training be?

- Sensitivity training. Youth are going through enough with everything on their plate as it is.
- Cultural competency and linguistic competency.
- Mental health. Are cops equipped to deal with individuals with mental health crises?
- For most of the prosecutors and judges, we need to find a way for them to feel more empathy. We need to bring it to their attention. They need to learn empathy. It's easy to make a decision, but not care about the decision you made if it's not affecting you.
- The way post is done is not beneficial to our communities. If you are a judge, you have 20 years of experience. If you're a prosecuting attorney, you have at least 12–16 years of educational experience. The typical post class is 16–48 weeks. How can we expect to give law enforcement the tools they need to equitably enforce the law? We have police officers who are not vetted correctly. We have officers who have ties to hate groups. When we talk about stuff like this, we don't actually get to the root of any of these issues because nobody wants to create reform on how policing even works. In other countries, you go to school for 2–3 years to become a police officer.
- For prosecutors, training isn't really going to help. Most of them only care about their conviction rate instead of a fair system. That gives them better opportunities if their conviction rate is high. I think in certain aspects, training is a viable option, but another aspect is imposing systems of accountability.