

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS FOR YOUTH & UNITED PLAYAZ OF NEW YORK



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FOREWORD

This is a report about young people's experiences with the juvenile justice system. Yet unlike so many other reports, this one was conceptualized, designed, researched and written by young people who themselves have experienced the cruelty and horror of an inhumane, antiquated, and unjust system that throughout its history has done far more harm than good. While several adult staff members offered support, training, and guidance to the youth research team, young people led the entire project from top to bottom.

Community Connections for Youth (CCFY) is proud to publish this report as this research advances the organization's mission, which is "to empower grassroots faith and neighborhood organizations to develop effective community-driven alternatives to incarceration for youth." For us at CCFY, community-driven means that the people most impacted by the justice system – young people, family members, and community members—must be at the forefront of undoing the damage wrought by the juvenile justice system, and developing alternative solutions that bring hope, healing and transformation to our communities. While the powers that be have stigmatized our young people, families, and communities as "the problem," we believe that the very things that the world has labeled this way are actually the solution to our most pressing social issues.

We have seen this process take effect in transformative ways. Six years ago, we launched an initiative to put grassroots faith and community organizations at the forefront of diverting youth in the South Bronx from formal justice system involvement. After a three year evaluation by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, we released a report on the South Bronx Community Connections project that showed this community-driven intervention had produced statistically significant reductions in recidivism, and more importantly had changed the trajectory of young people's lives through deep community engagement. Since the release of that report in 2014, cities across the nation have sought to replicate CCFY's approach of mobilizing grassroots faith and neighborhood organizations in the most impacted communities to engage young people in the juvenile justice system.

Four years ago, we partnered with Justice 4 Families and the Data Center, a participatory action research project that mobilized the family members of youth in the juvenile justice system to produce *Families Unlocking Futures: Solutions to the Crisis in Juvenile Justice*.¹ Along with 10 other grassroots organizations in cities

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across the United States, we engaged family members in collecting and analyzing data, and proposing recommendations for family-led and community-driven change. In New York City, the report led to difficult but transformative discussions between family members and system stakeholders, which ultimately resulted in new policies and practices that were responsive to the needs of families. One of the key outcomes of this process was the establishment of a citywide *Parent Support Program (PSP)* through which the NYC Department of Probation contracts community-based organizations to employ Parent Peer Coaches to help families navigate the juvenile justice system.

This project, supported with a community organizing grant from the New York Foundation, enabled CCFY to hire young people as participatory action researchers to document the experiences of young people in the juvenile justice system, and to engage their peers in a series of reflections to propose youth-led solutions for change. This report documents their findings and recommendations – but should only be considered the beginning of a deeper process of working for change. The young people have shared their truths in this report in ways that hold the mirror up to the systems that purport to serve them. The challenge before us now is to grapple with these findings and recommendations, both in our own self-reflection, and in meaningful and committed engagement with the young leaders who are proposing solutions that are far more transformative than what many adult professionals dare to consider.

I invite you to read this report, to listen to the experiences the young people have shared, and to think deeply about their recommendations. But most importantly, I urge you to use this report as the starting point to enter into dialogue with the young people who have the answers.



Reverend Rubén Austria
*Founder & Executive Director
Community Connections for Youth*

PAR METHODOLOGY AND THE LIVED EXPERIENCE

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an approach to research that emphasizes participation and action from community members who are most affected by the issues we study. Through the research process, we seek to understand the world around us, engage in collaborative reflection, and develop strategies for collective action that leads to social change. PAR stresses collective inquiry and experimentation grounded in lived experience and social history. It allows space for those impacted by social issues to take a leadership role in research that leads to activism. PAR creates awareness and builds solidarity among people sharing familiar lived experiences, letting all parties know they are not alone in their struggles. In this way, PAR also creates hope for the possibility of change.

What Is PAR, Anyway?

PAR is a community-driven research methodology and research framework. It differs from traditional research in that it mobilizes the individuals who are most impacted to study the issues that affect them. Those directly affected are the ones asking the questions, seeking out the answers, and drawing conclusions, with an eye towards collectively creating solutions. PAR is a rigorous approach to research in which we collect data – quantitative and qualitative – to contextualize our experiences, strengthen our ideas, and push forward our vision for change. In PAR, numbers matter, but so do our stories, and the sense we make of them. PAR includes a spectrum of practices and perspectives that have been used by communities, academics, and activists. We draw from these practices and lean on them in the development of this research project.

Why Do We Think PAR Is Important in Research?

PAR breaks down the barrier between “researcher” and “researched” – a binary that has traditionally reinforced an unequal power dynamic, especially around investigations into youth in the juvenile

justice system. In many research inquiries, poor Black and Brown youth are the ones “researched” by wealthy, white, educated “researchers” who are granted the power to speak for the subjects they study. PAR complicates this binary by turning the “researched” into the “researcher” and valuing the importance of “lived experience.”

PAR puts a familiar face in charge of handling community information. When the researchers look like the participants and share the same lived experiences, the process of collecting data is much less likely to feel invasive and exploitative. Traditional research often makes research subjects feel tokenized and taken advantage of for the benefit of others. PAR, on the other hand, establishes trust between researchers and participants because of the familiarity of shared experiences. Furthermore, PAR encourages a broad spectrum of community members to take part in the process of investigation and reflection. This collective approach to asking questions and creating solutions fosters accountability, sustainability, and engagement, which are key ingredients in building community-driven movements for social change.

How Did We Use PAR for this Report?

For our research process, we drew on the concept of REALsearch, a term created by the Youth Justice Coalition (YJC) in Los Angeles, CA. YJC defines REALsearch as a process that “takes those of us in the community out from under the microscope. Beyond the role of storyteller, we are claiming our rights as researchers, analysts, problem solvers, and the architects of programs and public policy.”² At CCFY, this meant we, as young people, owned our ability to be researchers.

In the summer of 2014, a grant made by the New York Foundation to support youth organizing allowed CCFY to hire young people as researchers

**84% OF THE YOUTH
WOULD LIKE TO SPEAK
AND BE HEARD IN COURT.**

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for this project. Between July 2014 and August 2015, CCFY hired four young people whose previous contact with the justice system had inspired them to help their peers overcome similar experiences. We, the researchers, range in age from 21 to 23 years old. All of us were born, raised, and continue to live in the Bronx. Three of us are African-American, and one of us is Latino. We have all had contact with police, and some of us have been adjudicated and incarcerated. All of us have family members and friends who have experienced the justice system.

We began by undergoing a week of training from experts in PAR who had conducted similar research projects. This training helped us understand the PAR process and gave us the skills to develop research questions and design tools to capture the answers we were seeking. We spent the next three weeks developing a framework for the research, designing surveys, and planning our data collection strategy. Then, over the next month, we used several methods to collect data from our peers. We conducted street outreach in neighborhoods throughout the Bronx, interviewed youth at community events, and conducted surveys at other youth-serving organizations. We even went to the Bronx Family Court to administer our survey among young people currently going through the juvenile justice system.

All of the survey responses were then inputted into a database, allowing us to examine data patterns. We collectively reviewed the data and discussed and analyzed the information. As REALsearchers, we believed it was important to share the data with other young people, including those who had responded to surveys, in order to engage in a broad and transparent analysis process. Data can ignite conversations, raise awareness, and spark additional questions. We presented our data in workshops in which we discussed findings with our peers and invited them to develop solutions. These gatherings showed young people that their interactions with the justice system were not isolated experiences but part of a larger pattern.

In this report, we share our preliminary findings. However, PAR is not a project that ends when a report is published. This process will continue to evolve as young people ask more questions, dig deeper into the data, and as we reflect together on our personal experiences. Ultimately, we aim to change the very systems that we have experienced as we enter into informed dialogue with the people who hold positions of power in these institutions.

**ONLY 42% OF THE YOUTH HAD
THEIR PARENTS NOTIFIED
IMMEDIATELY AFTER THEIR ARREST**

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OVERVIEW OF THIS REPORT

In this report, we share the findings from each section of our survey. Collectively, these sections tell a story of young people's experiences in the Bronx juvenile justice system, beginning with arrest and continuing through their contact with the justice continuum (court, detention, probation, placement, etc.). To help the reader get a sense of context for how the experiences of the youth we surveyed reflect the general population of Bronx system-involved youth, we include the most recent available data compiled by the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services on the demographics of Bronx youth. All of the general Bronx data on juvenile justice processes, along with the data on race and ethnicity, are from this Bronx County Juvenile Justice Report.³ After outlining our findings from the survey, we offer recommendations on how to improve and transform the juvenile justice system in ways that are responsive to the needs of youth and families. We share these recommendations from the perspective of reducing the harm young people experience in the system. Our ultimate vision, however, is to eradicate the institutions and practices that perpetuate unfair punishment and inhumane treatment of Black and Brown youth.

"Our ultimate vision. . . is to eradicate the institutions and practices that perpetuate unfair punishment and inhumane treatment of Black and Brown youth."

SECTION 1

ARREST

During the summer of 2014, we surveyed 92 people who had been arrested in the Bronx at the age of 15 or younger. New York State is one of only two states in the nation where the age of criminal responsibility is just 16 years old. Therefore, any young person arrested at age 16 or 17 is automatically tried in the adult criminal justice system. We consider this an injustice in and of itself and believe that New York must raise the age of criminal responsibility. However, for the purposes of this report, we focused only on youth who had been arrested when the law considers them juveniles. The number of juveniles 15 and under who were arrested in the Bronx has declined from 4,039 in 2010 to 1,728 in 2014. Similarly, the number of juveniles under the age of 16 arrested and charged as adults has declined from 210 in 2010 to 120 in 2014. While we celebrate these declines, we believe that far too many young people are still unnecessarily arrested in the Bronx. Indeed, African-American and Latino youth make up 88% of the Bronx youth population however they account for 98% of youth arrested in the Bronx.

Out of those surveyed, 68% youth reported that their case had gone to Family Court, while the remaining 32% were sent to Criminal Court. We found this number very alarming, because young people who are sent to Criminal Court below the age of 16 indicates that they are being tried as adults. The New York State Juvenile Offender Law allows for young people to be tried as adults for certain offenses even at age 13, 14 or 15. There is abundant research that demonstrates that putting young people through the adult criminal justice system is far more harmful than trying them in Family Court. Research shows that young people tried as adults are much more likely to be harmed and abused, attempt suicide, and reoffend.⁴

Additionally, our interest was in identifying where young people are being arrested. While listening

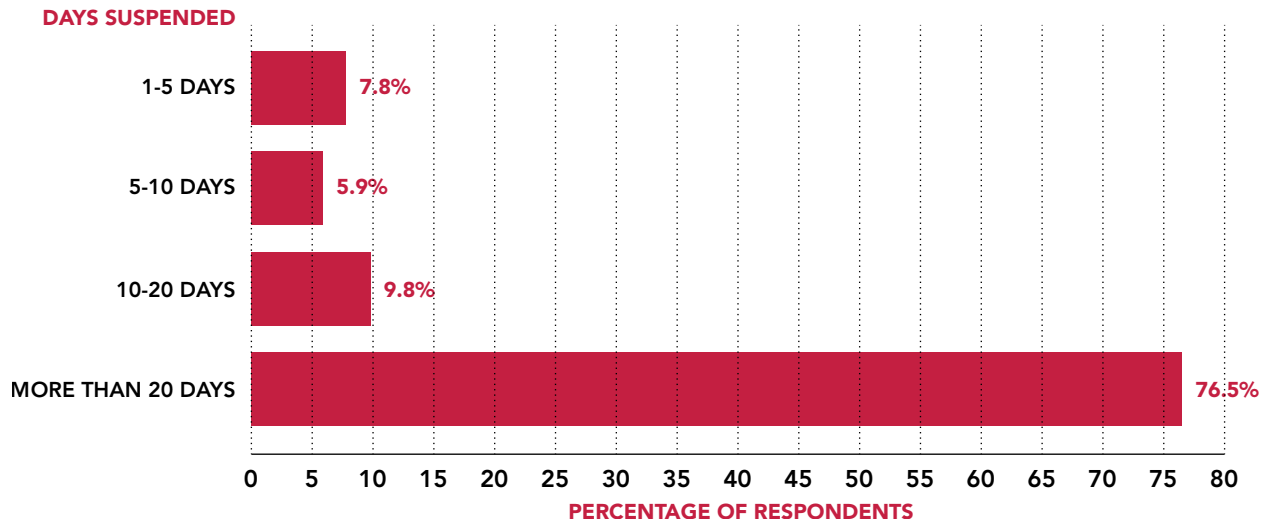
to participants' stories, we understood that location was very important in understanding how young people are criminalized in the South Bronx.

Twenty-seven percent of surveyed youth said that they were arrested in school. Fifty-six percent said they were arrested in their neighborhoods, and 17% said they were arrested in their homes. Of those arrested in school, 43% of them were also suspended. Some participants shared that they were arrested in school for off-campus offenses. These findings bring attention to the criminalization of young people in schools and what is commonly known as the "school to prison pipeline." There have been efforts to reduce arrests in schools, and school-based arrests and summons have fallen from 2,548 arrests and summons in the 2011-2012 school year to 775 arrests and summons in the 2014-2015 school year.⁵ Much of this is due to community-driven advocacy to push schools to implement restorative practices. However, the Bronx is still highly overrepresented in punitive school practices. In 2014-2015, 30.7% of school-based arrests, and 60.4% of school-based summons were in the Bronx – and 37.7% of all school-based summons were for disorderly conduct. The presence of police in schools still puts young people of color in poor communities at far greater risk of justice system involvement for normal adolescent behavior.

About 60% of the participants were not only arrested, but also suspended from school, causing them to miss substantial amounts of classroom course work, thus greatly impacting their academic records. Penalizing youth by prohibiting their access to education and academic advancement only perpetuates problems.

We also wanted to know what policies and procedures took place after the arrest of youth. We were looking to see how the police involved

NUMBER OF SCHOOL DAYS MISSED AFTER ARREST



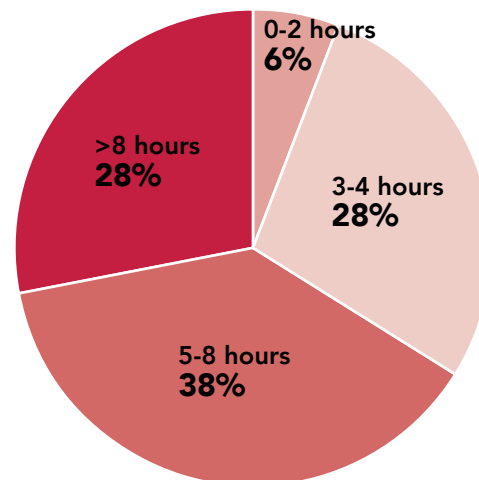
parents and/or guardians in the process. Only 42% of those arrested said that their parents were notified immediately. Forty five percent said that their parents were notified, but not immediately; and 12% said that police did not notify their parents. New York State Law requires police to notify parents/guardians immediately after a juvenile's arrest.

Seventy-two percent of surveyed youth said that their parents were not present while they were being questioned. New York State Law permits police to interrogate juveniles without their parents present, but requires that police officers make every reasonable effort to inform parents/caregivers that they have the right to be present, and that their child has the right to remain silent and have an attorney present.

Our own personal experiences with the police, and the documented history of abusive police practices in communities of color, leads us to believe that police officers often abuse their authority when questioning juveniles, taking advantage of children under the age of 16 who are scared and nervous. Participants were asked how long they stayed in the police precinct before being picked up or taken to court or a facility. Six percent were at the precinct for less than two hours. Twenty-eight percent were there between

three and four hours. Thirty eight percent were there between five and eight hours. Twenty-eight percent shared that they were in a precinct for over eight hours. We have heard stories of police officers intentionally delaying the amount of time they kept young people in custody in order to admit them to juvenile detention, and to boost their overtime pay.

HOURS HELD IN PRECINCT AFTER ARREST



We believe that police in our neighborhood routinely treat young people unfairly. We see our neighbors getting stopped, questioned aggressively, and sometimes taken away in handcuffs. Our survey showed that 37% of participants also felt that the officers used excessive force. We asked questions about young people's interactions with police at the first point of their arrest to get a better understanding of the experience of a child in custody. We inquired about whether the officer told them what would happen after their arrest. Seventy five percent of young people felt the officers were being dishonest with the information they provided or neglected to tell them what would happen after their arrest. Youth expressed a lack of trust with police. A system that does not inspire trust makes it very difficult for youth to be honest.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Prohibit questioning of youth by police prior to parent or guardian notification
- Provide youth and families with clear instructions on how to file complaints of police mistreatment with the CCRB, the Office of the Inspector General, and other police accountability resources
- Implement a shorter processing time for juveniles

SECTION 2

PROBATION

In the juvenile justice system, Probation has the first opportunity to divert a young person from formal court processing through a process in New York State called adjustment. If young people are not diverted, and are eventually adjudicated delinquent, they can be placed on Probation supervision. In the Bronx in 2014, Probation opened 1,417 juvenile delinquency intake cases in the Bronx. Yet of these cases, only 340 cases (24%) were adjusted, which means that 76% of cases were referred for prosecution. We recognize that the overall number of cases going to Probation has dropped dramatically in recent years – in 2010, 3,949 juvenile delinquency cases were opened. While the smaller number of cases coming before Probation may still be more serious, we still believe that many more of these cases could be kept out of court, and we encourage Probation to redouble their efforts to adjust more cases.

We asked youth how they felt about their Probation plan. 4% said that the plan did very little to ensure their rehabilitation. However, 70% said their plan for probation was fine and reported that they felt secure in their efforts for rehabilitation. Twenty six percent said that Probation's plan for them was too strict and rigid, making it almost inevitable for them to commit minor mistakes for which they were punished. They mentioned that there were too many mandated programs and not enough time for personal and family responsibilities. We asked youth how many mandated programs they were required to attend. Sixty-five percent of youth responded that they were only referred to one program. Seventeen percent of youth said they were referred to two programs. Eighteen percent said that they were referred to three or more programs. We believe that requiring young people to attend too many programs simultaneously can be stressful and overwhelming. When asked if the programs to which they were

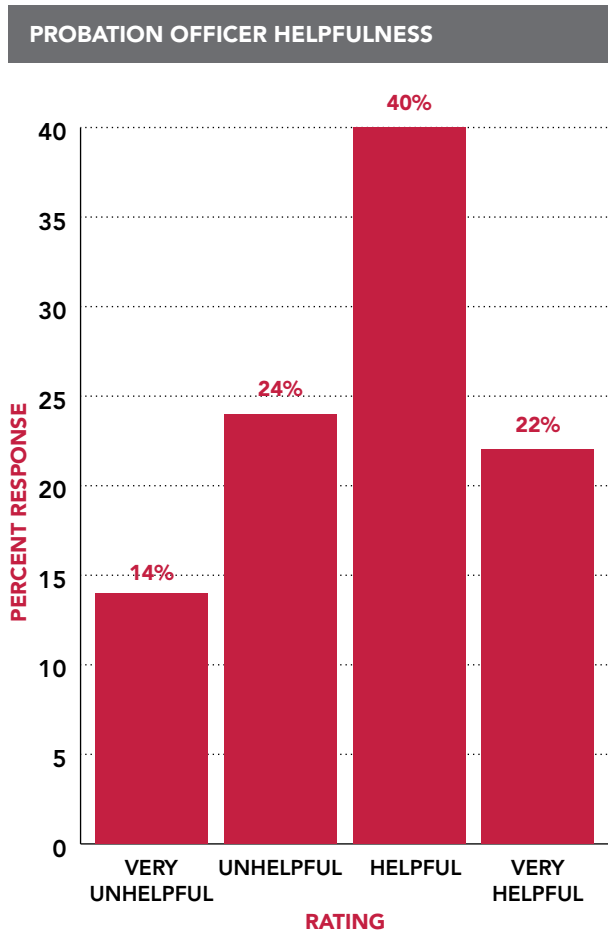
RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase pre-filing diversion (adjustment) of juvenile cases to community programs
- Give youth voice in selecting programs and consider safety concerns when it comes to location
- Avoid over-programming youth and mandating young people to attend too many programs or services
- Provide access to vocational training and employment

assigned were helpful, 45% replied that the programs were not helpful. These youth explained they felt too heavy a demand on their time, and that it was hard to keep everything in focus. We are concerned that nearly half of youth find the programs intended to help them to actually be unhelpful, and we encourage Probation and providers to examine why youth feel that the programs are not meeting their needs.

Beyond the programs that youth were referred to, we wanted to know how youth felt about the helpfulness of their Probation Officer. Only 14% said their Probation Officer was very unhelpful. Twenty-four percent said that their Probation Officer was somewhat unhelpful. Forty percent said their Probation Officer was helpful, and 22% said their Probation Officer was very helpful. Participants expressed that the most helpful thing a Probation Officer can do is to assess the interests and individual needs of youth, and refer youth to activities based on what youth feel is positive and can work for them. Youth expressed that when they were given ownership over their probation plan, they were more likely to commit themselves and follow through on their requirements. We

were pleasantly surprised to find that youth felt positively about their probation experience, however, we encourage Probation Officers to give youth more ownership over their probation plans and to collaborate with young people when it comes to assigning them to programs.

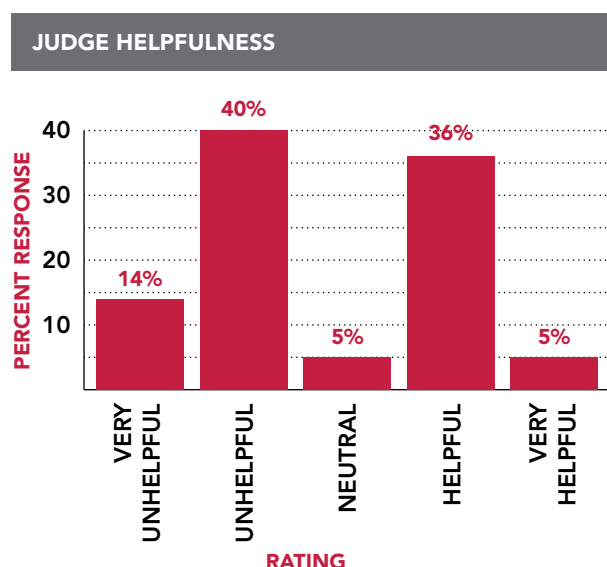


SECTION 3

JUVENILE COURT PROCESSES

In 2014, 790 juvenile petitions were filed in the Bronx Family Court, meaning that these cases made their way before a judge. Ninety seven percent of these cases were African-American and Latino youth. The average length of cases, from initial filing to disposition, was 173 days. In the Bronx, 36% of cases lasted longer than 6 months. These ongoing juvenile court proceedings can be very stressful on youth as well as on their families. Youth reported missing school to attend court dates, and also reported that family members missed work to be present at court hearings, with some parents losing their jobs because they had missed too many days of work.

We asked youth how they felt about their legal representation in court. Of the youth surveyed, Eight percent had a paid lawyer, 77% had a public defender, and 15% had a court appointed private attorney. A lot of participants said they had a public defender because they couldn't afford a paid lawyer. The Bronx remains the poorest Congressional District in the nation, where many families don't have enough money for basic groceries; therefore, paid lawyers are definitely not in the budget. We then asked how they felt about their legal representation in court. Sixty percent said they were satisfied by the efforts made by their attorney, but 40% said they were not.



While we recognize the hard work and dedication of public defenders, we often wonder whether lawyers have adequate resources to give each young person's case the amount of time it deserves. Too many young people were never given the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to their defense. When we asked participants if their lawyer ever asked them what they thought should happen in their case, 51% said yes and 49% said no. When young people are not actively engaged in matters so critical to their own lives, they experience a sense of helplessness and a diminishment of their autonomy and value.

We also asked young people how they felt about the judges who presided over their cases, and to what degree they found the judge helpful in the process. Fourteen percent said that their judge was very unhelpful, 40% said unhelpful, 5% said neutral, 36% said helpful, and 5% said very helpful.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Allow youth to participate in discussions about what treatment options, incentives/sanctions, and service plans will be recommended to the judge
- Provide youth and families with a clear and detailed orientation to the language and procedures of Family Court, as well as ongoing support to answer future questions and concerns. This support should be delivered via peer mentoring from other youth that have experienced the juvenile justice system
- Provide youth with an opportunity to speak in court where what they say cannot be used against them
- Create a provision similar to "jury duty" that excused families from work in order to attend court dates for their children

SECTION 4

DETENTION

We then asked the participants whether they had been held in a detention center at any time. Of the 79 youth who that answered the question, 52 stated that they had spent time in juvenile detention. In the Bronx, 857 youth were admitted to juvenile detention in 2014, yet only 8% of these were juvenile offenders – youth charged with serious and violent offenses. This means that 92% of youth admitted to detention were charged with less serious offenses. Ninety-eight percent of Bronx youth who were detained were African-American or Hispanic.

We asked young people where they were held in detention. Twenty-five youth said they were held in secure detention, either at Horizon in the Bronx, or Crossroads in Brooklyn. Sixteen youth reported being held in Non-Secure Detention (NSD). Eleven young people said they had been in both secure and non-secure detention.

We then asked the participants how long they were in detention. In 2014 in the Bronx, the average length of stay in detention was 33 days, but 18% of those detained had stays of 45 days or

more. Of the youth who reported they spent time in juvenile detention, all 52 said they had been in detention for a month or longer. We followed up with those that had stayed longer and heard various reasons for the long lengths of stay. Some said it was due to fighting in the detention center, others mentioned disputes with parents, and some said it was due to the serious nature of their case.

We also asked the participants how many programs they participated in. Twenty-six participants said that they did not participate in any programs while in NSD or Horizon/Crossroads. Twenty of the 52 said they participated in 1—2 programs, and 6 said they were participating in 3 or more programs while detained.

Finally, we asked young people about schooling during their detention stays. Sixteen of the 52 participants who responded stated that their schooling was terrible. The majority of respondents (33) stated that the schooling was “okay,” and only 3 participants stated that they learned a lot.

DETENTION & PLACEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Provide flexible visitation hours and transportation assistance for families to visit youth while detained or in placement
- End the restriction of visits as a form of discipline or punishment
- Expand visitor eligibility to include extended family members, and non-blood relatives (informal family members) who are part of a young person’s positive support system
- Provide frequent and flexible phone access for youth to contact family members and loved ones
- House youth in small, home-like environments in their neighborhoods that focus on therapy, counseling, and education
- Therapy must move beyond traditional counseling to include a holistic approach to healing that is culturally competent, community-specific, and tailored to each youth’s needs

SECTION 5

PLACEMENT

In addition to detention (pre-sentencing), 90 Bronx youth were placed out of home (post-sentencing) in either a state or city-run facility in 2014, down from 136 in 2010. Ninety-six percent of Bronx youth placed in 2014 were African-American and Latino. When we asked young people if they had ever experienced an out-of-home placement, either in a juvenile residential facility or an adult prison, 46 stated that they had spent time in such a facility.

Concerned about the effects of isolation from loved ones, we went on to ask the participants if they were allowed to make phone calls to family members as frequently as they wanted. Forty-two out of the 47 (89%) who had been locked up stated they were not allowed to make phone calls upon request. Denied access to family members, lawyers, or other support systems, youth inevitably have to depend on the help available and nearest to them. When asked about the willingness of staff to help with the concerns of imprisoned youth, only 27% of youth felt that the staff was helpful in responding to their concerns. This means that the majority of imprisoned youth (73%) were left with no one to turn to for guidance or support.

We also asked how these youth were handling school while in placement. Only 1 of the 45 who responded said they had learned a lot while in placement.

To unpack the daily trauma these children faced while locked up, we asked both about the role of counselors and about the counseling services offered. Twenty-one out of 47 participants (47%) stated they had not received any form of counseling, while 15 stated that they did receive counseling but that the counseling was not helpful. Given the great amount of stress young people experience while incarcerated, it is imperative that they are seen by counselors who are able to help them as often as possible. Too many young people are left to suffer alone and most times in silence.

We then asked youth if facility staff actively put a transitional plan in place upon their release from a facility. Thirty-four of the 46 who responded (74%) shared that they didn't have any sort of plan or supports once they were released from the facility.

DETENTION & PLACEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Ensure that school credits and progress reports are accurately accounted for while they are in detention/placement to support youth when they transition back home no matter when in the semester they return
- Include educational choice in transition planning to allow youth to select the schools they would like to attend when they return to the committee
- Train and equip teachers to deal with the needs of students who are returning to schools from detention and/or placement
- Schools should identify a "welcoming committee" for youth returning from detention/placement composed of positive supports, including peer mentors, to assist young people with adjusting to the school environment without stigmatization

SECTION 6

FAMILY MEMBER SUPPORT

Juvenile justice system involvement affects not only youth, but their families as well. We asked survey participants key questions to better understand the home lives of adolescents placed in detention. The majority of participants surveyed (61) said they had some sort of support from their families during processing. However, others said they didn't have family support, either because they felt no one cared enough to support them in court or their family members were too busy. As previously noted, supporting one's child through numerous court hearings can have a negative impact on a parent's employment. Five participants stated that a family member had lost their job due to missing work to attend court hearings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Notify parents immediately when a young person is arrested
- Inform parents of their rights to be present when youth are questioned
- Notify families when young people are detained and update families any time a young person is moved from one location to another in the juvenile justice system
- Give families advance notification prior to release of youth from facilities and involve them in support and transition plans

**74% OF YOUTH LEAVING
FROM RESIDENTIAL PLACEMENT
SAID THEY HAD NO SUPPORT IN
THEIR TRANSITION HOME.**

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If it's not the best

70% OF YOUTH WHO EXPERIENCED
THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM
WOULD LIKE TO BE CONSIDERED
IN POLICY DISCUSSIONS.

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SECTION 7

IDENTIFYING SOLUTIONS

Traditional researchers often excel at analyzing problems but fall short when it comes to creating solutions. A key benefit of the PAR process is that in addition to studying problems, it engages impacted participants in developing positive, healthy solutions. The final section of the surveys and interviews asked young people to identify positive alternatives to what they had experienced in the juvenile justice system.

Of the 92 participants surveyed, 63% expressed that they would like to be supported by other youth who have been through the system. Participants understood that those who had gone through the juvenile justice system would be open and honest about their experiences, and would be better qualified to help them navigate the system and advise them on strategies to succeed. About 75% of participants surveyed stated that they would like to be more involved in the decisions made concerning their cases. In earlier conversations and survey questioning, we observed that a large percentage of youth were not given the opportunity or allowed to speak at court hearings. We took the conversation and questioning further and asked if the participants would like to be heard during their court proceedings. 85% answered that would like to speak and be heard. Youth should have the opportunity to explain themselves and be given a chance to speak for themselves. While we understand that our legal system provides youth with attorneys to speak for them as a means of protecting them from self-incrimination, we feel it is important for young people to have opportunities to speak for themselves in court in ways that do not compromise their defense.

Far too often, youth find themselves in more trouble because they have missed a court date. Court dates are scheduled during school hours, causing youth to miss classes, tests, and quizzes in order to attend court appointments. 66% of

participants said that it would be better to have court dates at more convenient times that don't force them to miss school.

We also asked participants about transportation to court. Seventy-one percent recommended providing young people with transportation support to court. Many young people spoke about having to jump the turnstiles in order to make court dates. Providing youth with MetroCards to attend court dates would help young people fulfill their obligations without the risk of getting in more trouble.

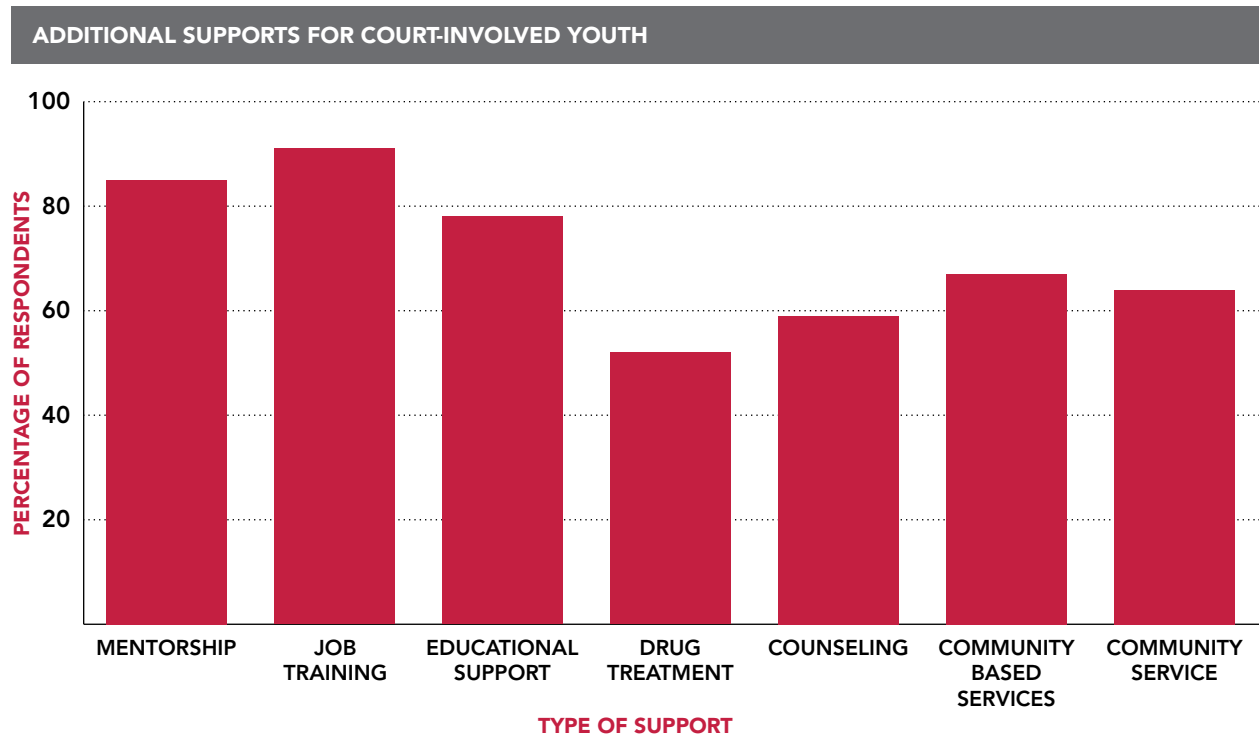
Many young people expressed concerns that court dates scheduled without advance notification interfered with personal or family obligations. Seventy percent of surveyed participants suggested giving more timely notifications and reminders of court dates in order to help youth and families make the necessary arrangements to ensure attendance.

Participants that had been detained or placed in a facility after their arrest reported having their visiting privileges taken away because of misconduct while in the facility. We then asked if eliminating that punishment would be beneficial. Close to 50% of participants suggested that facilities stop taking away visitation rights. Detention and placement facilities are already lonely and isolated spaces where youth feel abandoned and alone, causing them to act out. Being away from home and separated from family members and loved ones is stressful enough, and depriving youth of visitation only exacerbates the problem.

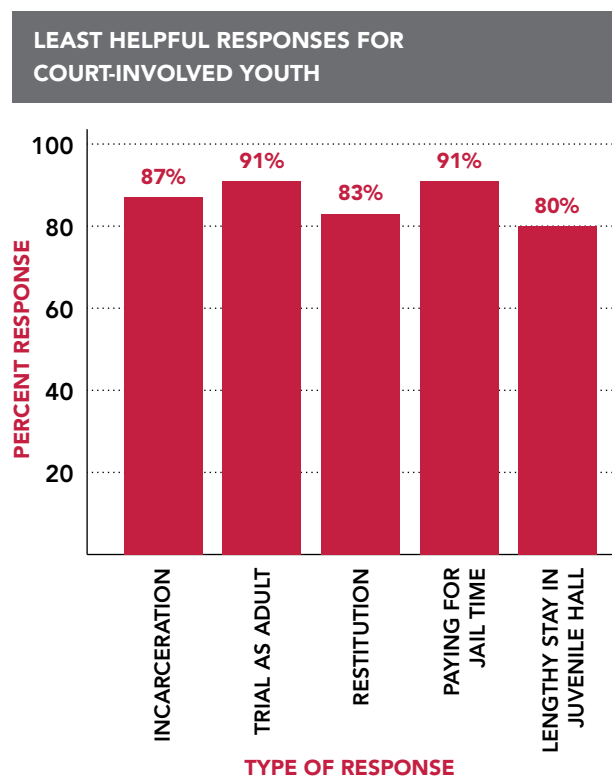
Often times, families and young people were not notified of their release date and were brought back home unexpectedly. This can cause problems with living arrangements and other household functions. Sixty-three percent

of surveyed participants concluded that proper advance notice of release dates could help families deal with young people's rehabilitation needs.

Eighty-eight percent of participants answered the question: "what additional options should judges have for court involved youth?" Their answers are in this chart.



Eighty-five percent of young people answered the question, "What kinds of programs/procedure are not helpful for the youth?" Their answers are in the next chart.



CONCLUSION

We often hear adults perpetuate a false narrative about young people, especially those of us who are involved in the juvenile justice system. They say: “young people aren’t concerned” or “these youth just don’t care.” These impressions become embedded in the psyches of adults with power in systems, allowing them to dismiss the concerns of youth as juvenile, unimportant, or petty. Those statements simply are not true and they violently misrepresent what young people actually feel. Many of us are deeply concerned with the matters that affect us, but feel misunderstood by people in the juvenile justice system, and therefore we resist cooperating. However, most young people would welcome the chance to engage with system stakeholders as respected partners. When we asked participants if they would like be considered in policy discussions regarding how juvenile justice systems work and what kind of programs are available, 70% of surveyed youth said that they would like to be involved in these conversations.

Too often, youth in the justice system are looked at, picked apart, ignored, and seen as unqualified to participate in decisions that govern their lives and experiences. We hear people call us “the future” but exclude us in the present when it comes to significant conversations about our wellbeing. Failure to engage us in these discussions in meaningful ways will only produce more failed attempts to reform a broken juvenile justice system.

The fact that so many of us want to engage in significant and meaningful policy discussions despite our overwhelmingly negative experiences in the juvenile justice system shows that we are well-aware of the impact of criminalization on our urban communities. We want to participate in making effective changes for our communities. These injustices have not gone unnoticed and we are unafraid and unashamed to speak truth to power. We, as young people in the Bronx, have shown that we are both able to understand the problems facing us and to develop community-based solutions. With this power and knowledge of self and surroundings, we can eradicate the long history of systematic institutionalized racism in the juvenile justice system that traumatizes so many Black and Brown youth in this country.

“...Most young people would welcome the chance to engage with system stakeholders as respected partners.”

ENDNOTES

- 1 Families Unlocking Futures: Solutions to the Crisis in Juvenile Justice. Justice 4 Families (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.justice4families.org>
- 2 RealSearch Manifesto. Youth Justice Coalition. For more information, visit: www.youth4justice.org
- 3 NYS Division of Criminal Justice Services, Office of Justice Research and Performance. (2015, June 1). Bronx County Juvenile Justice Profile. Retrieved from <http://www.criminaljustice.ny.gov/crimnet/ojsa/jj-reports/bronx.pdf>
- 4 Get the Facts. (n.d.). Retrieved February 19, 2016, from <http://raisetheagency.com/get-the-facts>
- 5 Student Safety Act Data | New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU)—American Civil Liberties Union of New York State. (n.d.). Retrieved February 19, 2016, from <http://www.nyclu.org/content/student-safety-act-data>

CCFY welcomes inquiries from interested parties on facilitated dialogues between youth leaders and system stakeholders, booking the research team for workshops and speaking engagement, and engaging CCFY to provide training and technical assistance around the recommendations in this report.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND THE RESEARCH SUPPORT TEAM

ALEXANDER FIGUEROA



Alexander Figueroa grew up in the South Bronx. His passion to help people is rooted in his experiences. He witnessed many of his friends struggle with making positive decisions and saw how the systems that are supposed to help them, actually made it worse. He has experienced losing people very close to him due to poor choices and lack of resources.

Through his experiences, he has realized that life doesn't have to be this hard.

DARIUS HILLS



Darius Hills is a frontline staff /mentor of United Playaz of New York. He is also in the process of earning his GED. Darius has been apart of United Playaz for 2 and half years and has made tremendous change for the better in his life. As a mentor, he works with youth in schools and also in the community. He wants to show youth the better route in life and how

to stay out of jail and into something positive. Darius is also a proud father and hopes to create a life for his son free from the struggles and barriers that he faced as a youth.

CHARLES HUDGINS



Charles Hudgins is a frontline staff member/mentor at United Playaz of New York. He is a dedicated father and mentor, as well as restorative justice community conferencing facilitator. He was incarcerated at the age of 17 and spent a year in Rikers Island, an adult facility, enduring over 90 days in solitary confinement. Upon his release, he completed

high school and graduated with a Regents level diploma. Currently, he is 24 years old and mentoring youth in schools, as well as youth who have been arrested and placed on probation, to help them see their own greatness and strengths, so that they can be better prepared for their future, and stay out of the justice system forever

DEVANTÉ LEWIS



DeVanté Lewis has been an active member of United Playaz of New York for over 2 years. He lives in the Bronx community and has a strong passion for social justice and art. He has played a variety of different characters in many off-Broadway plays as well as community productions, performances, and music videos. DeVanté has always immersed himself in

theatre, music, and culture. DeVanté has begun writing and creating various works of art, determined to make a space for himself and the groups of people he represents. He looks forward to continue working as an artist for social change and development, pushing boundaries, and inspiring all like him to do any and all that one can dream of when they put the mind and work to it.

WHITNEY RICHARDS-CALATHES



Whitney Richards-Calathes organizes on issues of mass incarceration, prison abolition, and transformative justice. She is co-founder of Sweet River Consulting based in NYC and also works closely with the Youth Justice Coalition in Los Angeles. She is a PhD candidate at the Graduate Center, CUNY. Most importantly, she is from the Bronx. Whitney provided training,

guidance and support for the youth researchers throughout the Participatory Action Research process and writing of this report

AMELIA FRANK



Amelia Frank is CCFY's Director of Youth Development. She is also the Founder of United Playaz of New York, a violence prevention and youth leadership organization that works with the Bronx's hardest to reach youth through street outreach, in-school services, recreational activities within the community, and support to incarcerated youth.

United Playaz believes, as its slogan says: "it takes the hood to save the hood." Amelia supervised and supported the youth researchers throughout the research and writing of this report.



ABOUT COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS FOR YOUTH

Community Connections for Youth (CCFY) is a Bronx-based non-profit organization whose mission is to empower grassroots faith and neighborhood-based organizations to develop effective community-driven alternatives to incarceration for youth. CCFY focuses on building community capacity for juvenile justice reform, which means mobilizing the stakeholders most impacted by youth crime and delinquency— young people, families, and community members—to play a leadership role in reforming the system and developing transformational alternatives.

ABOUT UNITED PLAYAZ OF NEW YORK

United Playaz of New York is a violence prevention organization that is dedicated to promoting peace and empowering youth to contribute positively and participate fully in their communities. UPofNY has a strong history of youth leadership programming, crisis intervention and credible messenger mentoring within schools as well as in the community with the hardest to reach youth. UPofNY also emphasizes the importance of preserving culture and ethnic traditions, positive recreational activities, and support services as necessary components for youth to take control over the directions of their lives. Our motto is "It takes the hood to save the hood."

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