



Girls' Experiences in the Texas Juvenile Justice System

2012 SURVEY FINDINGS



TEXAS CRIMINAL
JUSTICE COALITION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We would like to express our gratitude to the staff of the Ron Jackson State Juvenile Correctional Complex for opening their doors to us. Their willingness to allow us to survey youth proves their commitment to strengthening the provision of treatment and services for those in their care.

We also extend our sincerest appreciation to the youth who provided us feedback about their experiences within the system. Their perspective is critical to making real improvements in youth justice.

Lastly, we commend the work of Debbie Unruh, Ombudsman for system-involved youth in Texas, whose dedication to improving the lives of troubled and at-risk youth is an imperative component of the youth justice reform movement.

OCTOBER 2012

The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition (TCJC) works with peers, policy-makers, practitioners, and community members to identify and promote smart justice policies that safely reduce the state's costly over-reliance on incarceration – creating stronger families, less taxpayer waste, and safer communities.

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Letter from the Executive Director

Dear practitioners, families, and advocates,

Far too often, domestic violence survivors do not receive the support and interventions they deserve. That support is especially critical for children who have experienced domestic violence, and who are vulnerable to serious long-term consequences, including difficulties in school, substance abuse, and involvement in the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems.

I am sad to report that we are failing many of these traumatized children. Half of the girls we surveyed at the Ron Jackson State Juvenile Correctional Complex told us that their time in county juvenile facilities either did not help or actually did more harm than good for dealing with their past trauma. Tragically, eight percent told us that their time at Ron Jackson is doing more harm than good, suggesting that our juvenile justice system may be re-traumatizing many of these domestic violence survivors.

Trauma is not isolated to girls or to youth in state secure facilities. Over half of all youth referred to the Texas juvenile justice system each year have previously experienced a significant traumatic event. This trauma can cause a youth's stress response to be over-reactive, often leading to delinquent behavior. In a secure facility, the youth's over-reactive stress response can lead to discipline problems and deeper system involvement. This may help explain recent research showing that a youth's past experience with trauma is a major predictor – and for girls, the largest predictor – of the youth's assignment to increasingly serious secure placements in the Texas juvenile justice system.

These issues call for a system-wide response. Many of the experiences that the girls report in this survey – including negative interactions with staff, severe isolation from family, youth-on-youth violence – match the experiences that boys in state custody reported in a TCJC survey earlier this year. As Texas moves forward with reforms to address those concerns, we should increase funding for trauma counseling in the juvenile system, and we should revisit the policies and procedures in our juvenile facilities to respond better to the vulnerabilities and triggers of traumatized youth.

This month is National Domestic Violence Awareness Month, and I encourage all state and county agencies responsible for delinquent youth to take this opportunity to talk with the youth in their care and to develop trauma-informed systems based on their experiences. Together, we can make sure these kids get the support they need.

We are deeply grateful to the Office of the Independent Ombudsman and the staff of the Ron Jackson state secure facility for their support of this survey. Their openness inspires confidence, and we hope that this report will prove helpful to them in their work on behalf of girls in the juvenile justice system.



Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ana Yáñez-Correa".

Dr. Ana Yáñez-Correa

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SURVEY METHODOLOGY

This survey was conducted to provide context for ongoing policy discussions regarding juvenile justice reform.

The survey was conducted on July 17, 2012, at the Ron Jackson State Juvenile Correctional Complex in Brownwood, Texas. Approximately 100 girls were housed at the Ron Jackson facility on the day of the survey. All youth at the facility, except the dozen girls in the facility's security unit, were invited by facility staff to participate in the survey, and they were told the survey was voluntary, anonymous, and independent from the Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD). 50 youth chose to participate in the survey.

The interviews were conducted one-on-one. Youth were surveyed about their experiences in state secure facilities, as well as their previous experiences in county secure facilities. The issues of safety and programming were assessed using both open-ended and closed-ended questions, including scaled and ordinal questions.

Each survey question is reprinted with the response graphs beginning on page 5. If a youth was asked to choose a response from an options list, those options are listed in the parentheses following the question.

NEED FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

To more fully understand the experience of youth in Texas, surveys should be conducted throughout the juvenile justice system. In particular, there is a pressing need to survey the youth with serious mental illness at the Corsicana facility and the youth in the custody of county facilities across the state.

Additionally, surveys of staff at both state and county facilities will be essential as TJJD moves forward with its reforms. Our informal conversations with staff for this report provided important insight on the issues facing the juvenile justice system.

Finally, as this survey shows, family involvement is a critical component of successful reform. To better understand the obstacles to greater family involvement in the lives of their loved ones, surveys of families with system-involved members should be conducted throughout the state.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

► **Girls in the Texas juvenile justice system do not receive sufficient help to deal with past trauma in their lives.**

Forty-six percent of the surveyed girls report that the staff, programs, and treatment in county juvenile facilities did not help them deal with past trauma in their lives; an additional four percent said their time in the county facilities actually did more harm than good in dealing with past trauma. Thirty percent report that their time in the state secure facility has not been helpful in dealing with past trauma; an additional eight percent said the state facility has done more harm than good.

RECOMMENDATION: Support the effective implementation of trauma-informed programs at both county and state juvenile facilities to support rehabilitation and avoid re-traumatizing youth. Review and revise all policies and procedures to respond better to the vulnerabilities and triggers of traumatized youth.

► **Negative interactions with staff are the least helpful part of the juvenile justice system; they are also the number one thing girls want changed in the juvenile justice system.**

The surveyed girls report that inconsistent discipline and insulting comments from staff are the biggest barrier to their rehabilitation and future success. The girls also recommend changes to release procedures to reduce the long lengths of stay in the secure facility.

RECOMMENDATION: Expand staff training programs to build positive, respectful relationships between youth and staff. Bexar County's Seclusion and Restraint Reduction Initiative provides staff with tools to foster better interactions with youth, which has successfully reduced both staff-on-youth and youth-on-youth violence in its secure facilities.

► **Therapeutic programs are the most helpful part of the juvenile justice system in preparing girls for their future.**

The surveyed girls specifically identify Aggression Replacement Training, the PAWS canine program, substance abuse counseling, and behavior group counseling as the most helpful programs to their rehabilitation. Girls identify education as the second most helpful part of the juvenile justice system.

RECOMMENDATION: Increase funding for coordination of local therapeutic resources and juvenile justice programs at the state and county level.

► **Girls in the Ron Jackson state secure facility are extremely isolated from their families.**

Eighty-four percent of the surveyed girls report that family has visited them only a few times or never at the Ron Jackson facility. By contrast, 72 percent report that family visited them once a week or more often while they were in county facilities.

RECOMMENDATION: Increase the time that youth are allowed to talk to family each week by phone, and increase family participation in case plan meetings. Divert more youth away from remote state secure facilities.

► Many girls do not feel safe in the Ron Jackson state secure facility.

Twenty percent of the surveyed girls report feeling unsafe or very unsafe in the state secure facility; only 40 percent of the girls report feeling very or kind of safe in the state secure facility, with the remaining 40 percent reporting feeling 'ok.' The girls identify youth-on-youth violence as their number one concern. The girls report that gangs have no power at the state facility, and youth-on-youth fights are not more common at that state facility than at the county facilities.

These survey responses suggest the issue of safety at the Ron Jackson facility is multi-faceted, and creating a safer facility will require improvements on a wide range of environmental factors.

RECOMMENDATION: Expand staff training programs to build positive, respectful relationships between youth and staff. Because youths' anxiety about reentry can negatively impact safety within a facility, implement aftercare policies that require the development of reentry plans as early as possible after a youth begins placement in a secure state or county facility. Review and revise seclusion and restraint policies to incorporate best practices for traumatized youth. Increase family participation in case plan meetings. Increase funding support for local programs that keep youth in their home counties.

► The Texas juvenile justice system faces system-wide challenges and opportunities.

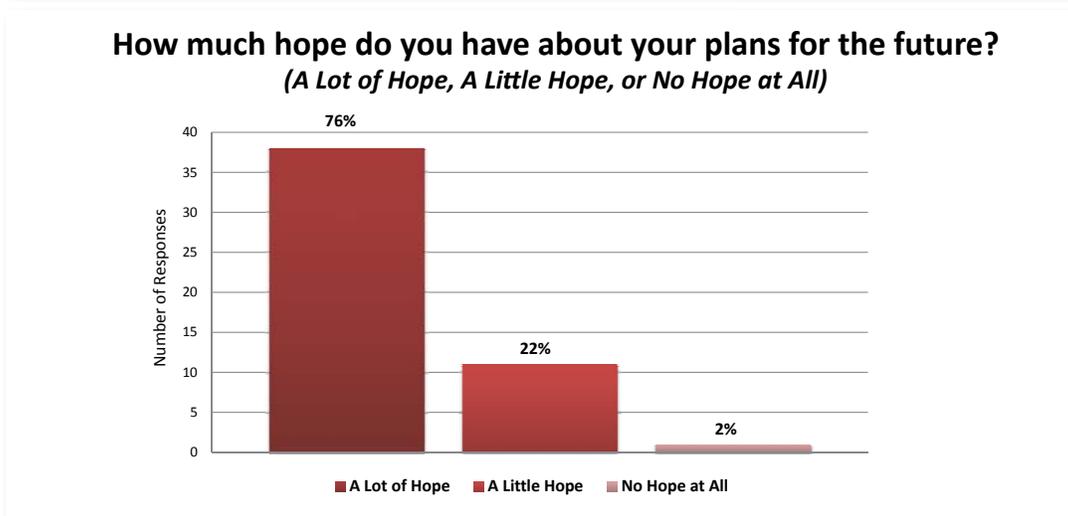
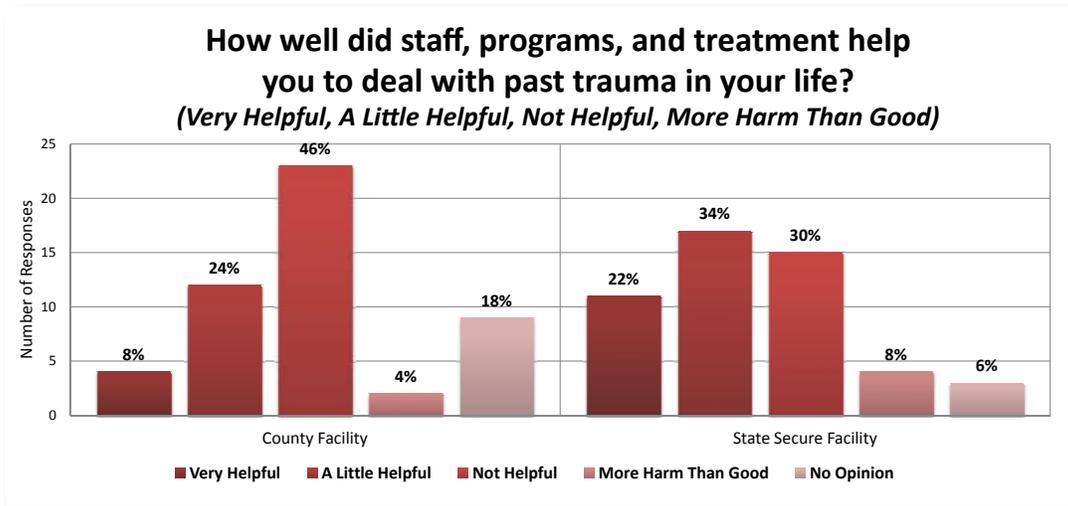
The girls at the Ron Jackson facility report many of the same issues as those reported by the boys at the Giddings state secure facility earlier this year,¹ suggesting these are systemic problems. Findings from both surveys include the following:

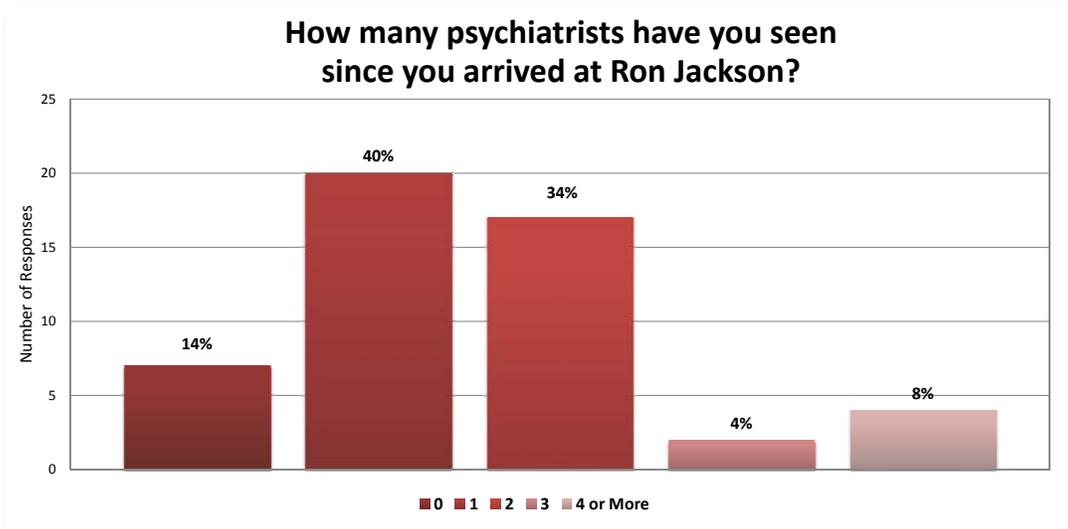
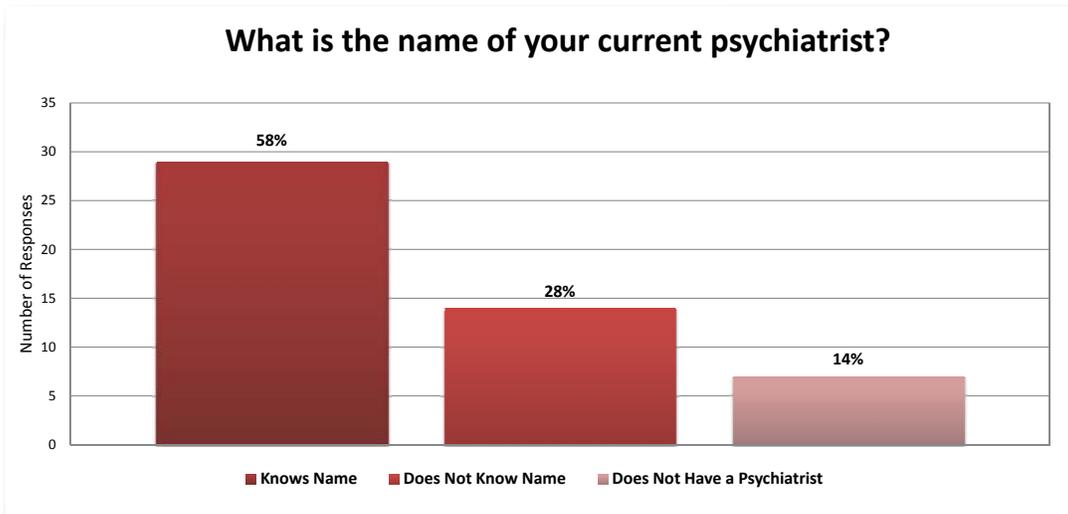
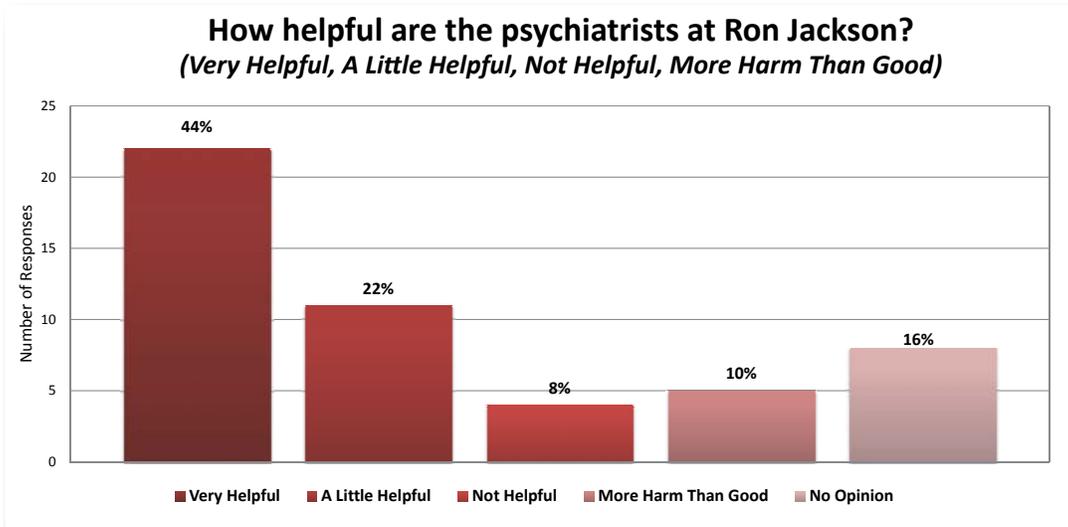
- Negative staff interactions are the least helpful part of the juvenile justice system and the issue most in need of change system-wide.
- Youth in state secure facilities are severely isolated from family, but family visits were very frequent when the youth were in county facilities.
- Youth-on-youth violence is the top issue of importance for youth in state secure facilities system-wide.
- Youth value education and therapeutic programs as the most helpful part of the juvenile justice system. Youth in the Texas juvenile justice system are motivated to succeed when given the opportunity.

RECOMMENDATION: Increase funding support for local programs that keep youth in their home counties.

TRAUMA , MENTAL HEALTH, AND HOPE: SURVEY RESPONSES

(*Twelve girls in security seclusion were not allowed to participate in the survey)





TRAUMA, MENTAL HEALTH, AND HOPE: RECOMMENDATIONS

“Counselors, staff, the legal system – they can’t understand where we’re coming from and what we need. They’re always trying to judge us for our trauma.” – Ron Jackson youth

Recent research in Texas has confirmed the observations of practitioners and advocates that a youth’s past experience with trauma is a major predictor – and for girls, the largest predictor – of the youth’s assignment to increasingly serious secure placements.¹ Traumatic events, including violence, neglect, abuse, threats, humiliation, and deprivation, can cause a youth’s stress response to be over-reactive,² often leading to delinquent behavior. For traumatized youth in secure facilities, their over-reactive stress response can lead to discipline problems and deeper system involvement.

The girls’ responses in this survey reveal an enormous need for system-wide improvements in both policies and procedures in Texas. Half of the girls report that their time in county juvenile facilities either did not help or did more harm than good in supporting them to process past trauma. Overall, the girls report that their time in the Ron Jackson state secure facility has been more helpful than their time in the county facilities, suggesting the trauma counseling available to girls at Ron Jackson is an effective intervention for traumatized youth.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Support the full implementation of trauma-informed programs at both county and state juvenile facilities to support rehabilitation and avoid re-traumatizing youth.³ In addition to implementing trauma counseling, stakeholders should review and revise all policies and procedures to respond better to the vulnerabilities and triggers of traumatized youth.



“I’m not seeing my counselor often enough to do any good.” – Ron Jackson youth

In Texas, a third of youth under probation supervision have a confirmed mental illness, and over half have previously experienced a significant traumatic event.⁴ But Texas spends less on mental health services per person than any other state,⁵ and county juvenile probation chiefs rank mental health services as the highest need for increased funding at their departments.⁶ As a result, less than one quarter of youth on probation with a confirmed mental illness receive mental health treatment.⁷ Many of the girls at Ron Jackson report insufficient support from mental health professionals.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Increase funding for coordination of local mental health resources and juvenile justice programs at the state and county level.



“It messes with people’s mental health to be secluded. There should be more time outside. Seclusion can last a long time even for petty things.” – Ron Jackson youth

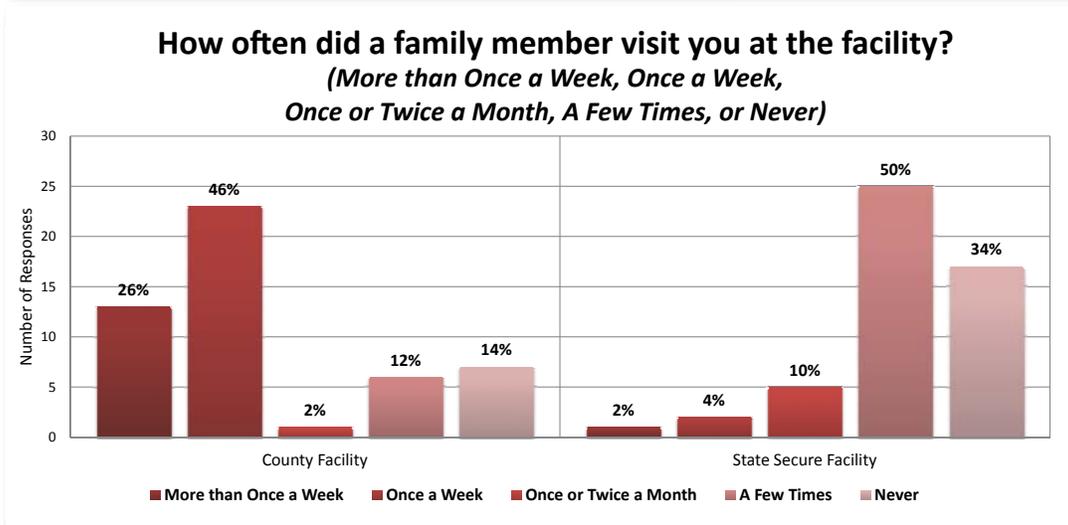
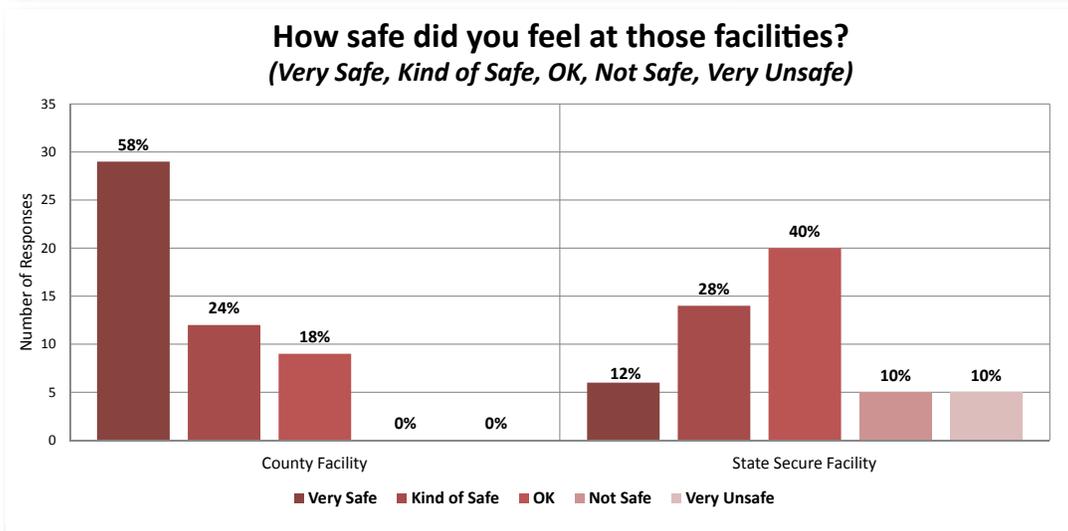
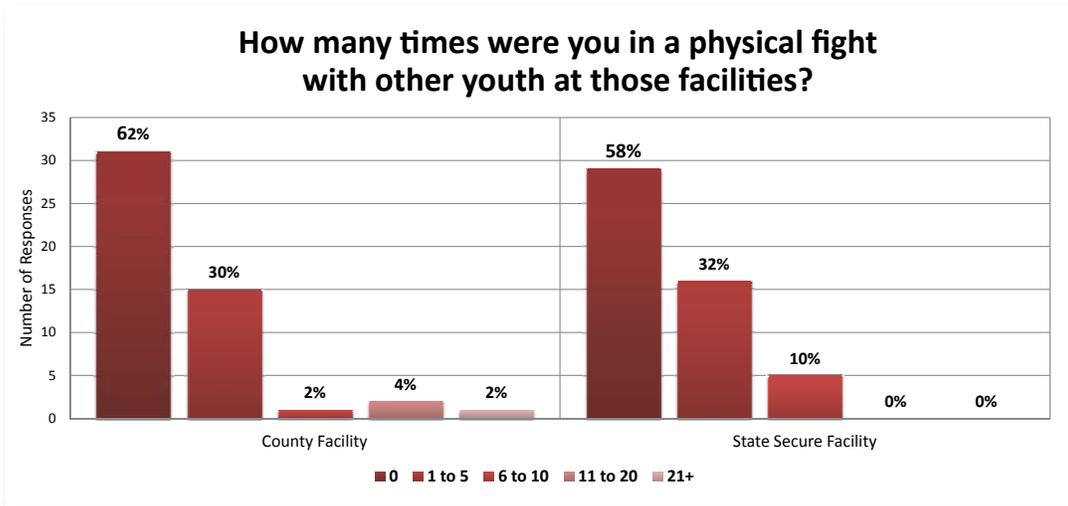
Twelve girls were in security seclusion on the day of the survey, and they were not allowed by staff to participate in the survey. As a result, the rates of seclusion in this report – with a quarter of the surveyed girls reporting spending 24 hours in isolation at least once per week – probably understates the use of seclusion significantly.

Use of seclusion is especially problematic for traumatized youth and youth with mental health issues.⁸ Despite these damaging effects, seclusion of youth is common in Texas juvenile facilities at both the county and state level. Each year, thousands of youth in Texas spend more than 24 hours in solitary confinement.⁹

RECOMMENDATION 3: Reduce state and county facilities’ reliance on seclusions and restraints. Review and revise state and county seclusion and restraint policies to incorporate best practices for traumatized youth.

SAFETY: SURVEY RESPONSES

(*Twelve girls in security seclusion were not allowed to participate in the survey)



SAFETY: RECOMMENDATIONS

“We had 10 fights last Friday. We tell staff what’s going to happen, but they don’t do anything to prevent it. Then they have to restrain us, and they do it dirty, not following PRT [Primary Restraint Technique]. They encourage kids to fight, and they tell groups of girls about fights.” – Ron Jackson youth

“Staff need to be more fair. They treat people differently. They all use the rules differently.” – Ron Jackson youth

“I would change the way staff interact with us. They disrespect us. We’ve had staff fired for bringing in stuff that’s not allowed.” – Ron Jackson youth

The girls at the Ron Jackson facility – like the boys at the Giddings state secure facility¹⁰ – vividly describe the damaging effects of negative staff interactions on both safety and therapeutic programming. The girls, like the boys, report that negative staff interactions are the least helpful part of the juvenile justice system and the issue most in need of change. The prevalence of these responses across campuses suggests a need for system-wide improvement in youth-staff relationships.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Expand staff training programs to build positive, respectful relationships between youth and staff. Bexar County’s Seclusion and Restraint Reduction Initiative provides staff with tools to foster better interactions with youth, which has successfully reduced both staff-on-youth and youth-on-youth violence in its secure facilities.



“More contact with my family gets me motivated to get out sooner.” – Ron Jackson youth

The girls in the Ron Jackson state secure facility are extremely isolated from their families. Eighty-four percent report receiving family visits only a few times or never at Ron Jackson, even though 72 percent received family visits once a week or more often when they were at county facilities. The girls say the remote location of the Ron Jackson facility caused the steep drop off in family visits. The girls report that low family involvement at Ron Jackson is negatively impacting treatment programs, safety, education, and reentry, in line with research on the issue.¹¹

RECOMMENDATION 2: Increase the time youth are allowed to talk to family each week by phone, and increase family participation in case plan meetings. Divert more youth away from remote state secure facilities.



“Mostly they prepare you for being here, not for when you get released.” – Ron Jackson youth

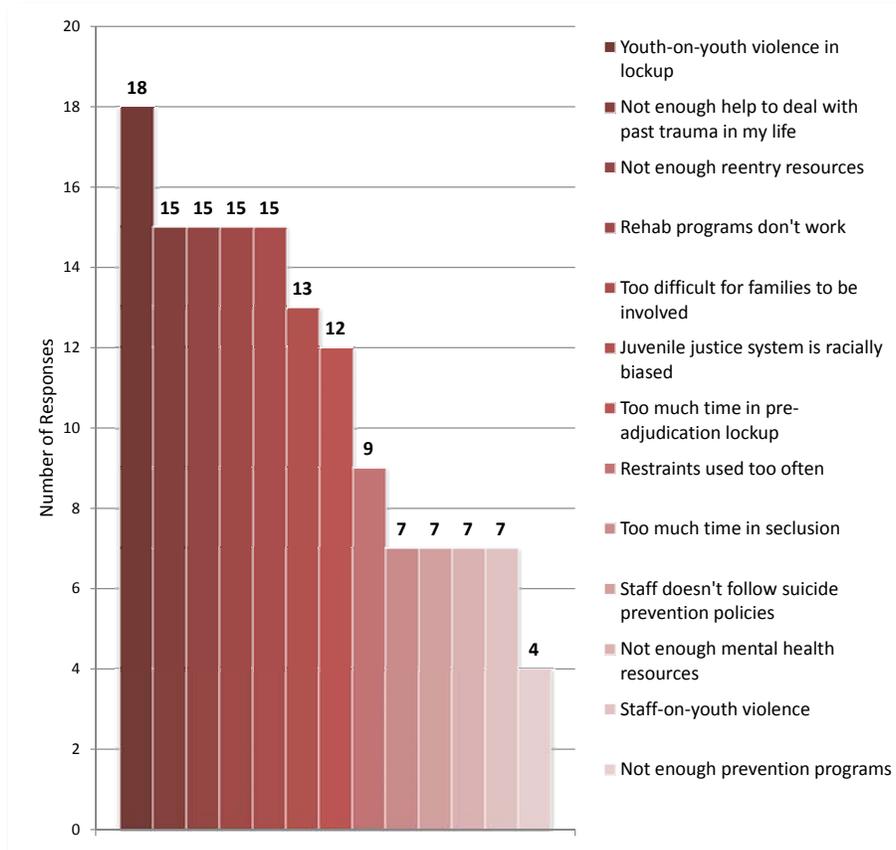
Release from placement is a vulnerable time for youth, when they suddenly find themselves facing the same education, family, and peer challenges that contributed to their original offense. The girls at Ron Jackson ranked reentry resources as the second most important issue facing them, behind only youth-on-youth violence. These girls, like all youth in secure facilities, become anxious about their return home long before they are released. As a result, policies that initiate reentry planning as soon as a youth enters a facility will not only improve outcomes after release, but also improve safety and programming within the facility.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Implement aftercare policies that require the development of reentry plans as early as possible after a youth begins placement in a secure state or county facility.

TOP ISSUES FOR YOUTH

(*Twelve girls in security seclusion were not allowed to participate in the survey)

From the following list of issues, which three are the most important to you? (Not enough money for prevention programs; Too much time in lockup before adjudication; Too much time in seclusion while in lockup; Restraints (physical/personal or mechanical) used too often in lock up; Staff doesn't follow suicide prevention policies; Not enough treatment resources for mental health issues; Too much youth-on-youth violence in lockup; Too much staff-on-youth violence in lockup; Rehabilitation programs don't work; Too difficult for families to be involved; Not enough resources to help reenter community after release from lockup; Juvenile justice system is racially biased; Not enough help to deal with past trauma in my life)



Representative quotes from youth interviews:

"We're always fighting each other, some staff encourage you to fight by telling other girls stuff."

"A lot of current misbehavior stems from past trauma, and only some girls get treatment for it."

"I want my mom and family to be involved. I barely get to talk to her. She's got a car that won't make it."

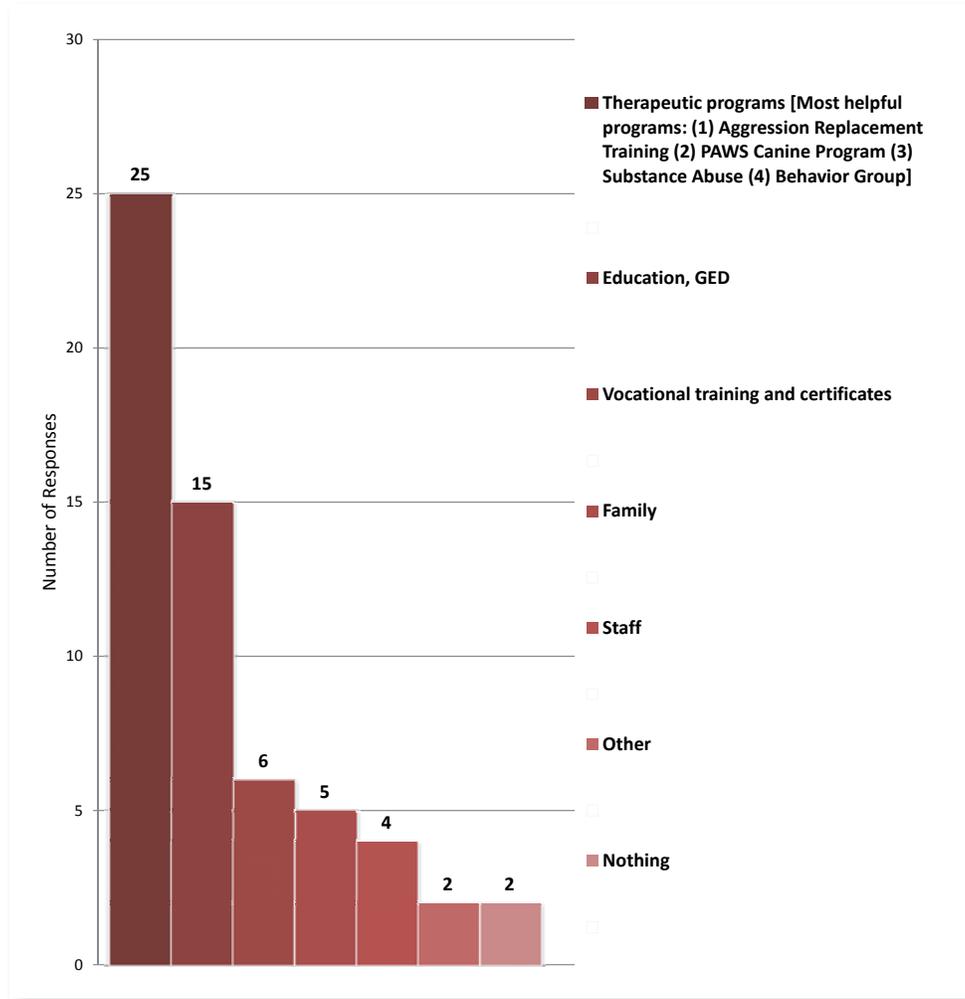
"For reentry, they give you a plan, but they don't give you a plan. They tell you to take care of it yourself."

"I've had a lot of things happen in my life and there is not enough help in here for that trauma."

MOST HELPFUL FOR YOUTH'S FUTURE

(*Twelve girls in security seclusion were not allowed to participate in the survey)

What has been the most helpful to prepare you for your future after you leave the juvenile justice system?



Representative quotes from youth interviews:

“Anger management helps me because I was very angry. Now I know how to control it.”

“The PAWS program teaches responsibility and respect.”

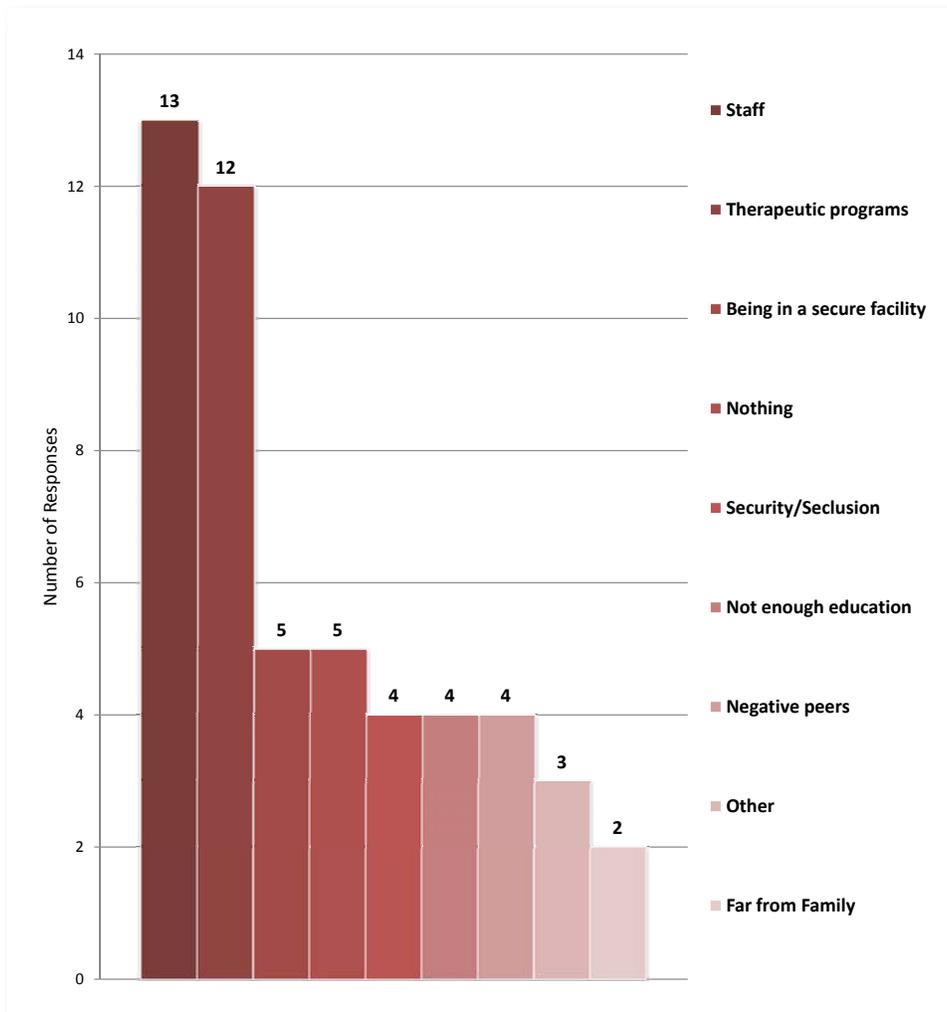
“I’m close to going home, and I’m almost through the drug program. Now I’ve realized I need to do this to change my life – I don’t want to live a drug life all my life.”

“I’ve started getting my GED. I had problems at school in the free, now I won’t have to go back to school.”

LEAST HELPFUL FOR YOUTH'S FUTURE

(*Twelve girls in security seclusion were not allowed to participate in the survey)

What has been the least helpful to prepare you for your future after you leave the juvenile justice system?



Representative quotes from youth interviews:

“Dealing with the staff – they’re disrespectful, cuss at us, they’re unfair and inconsistent, and there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“Some staff talk down to you. They say, ‘You’re gonna be nothing.’”

“The staff get in your face. They have no empathy and misuse security.”

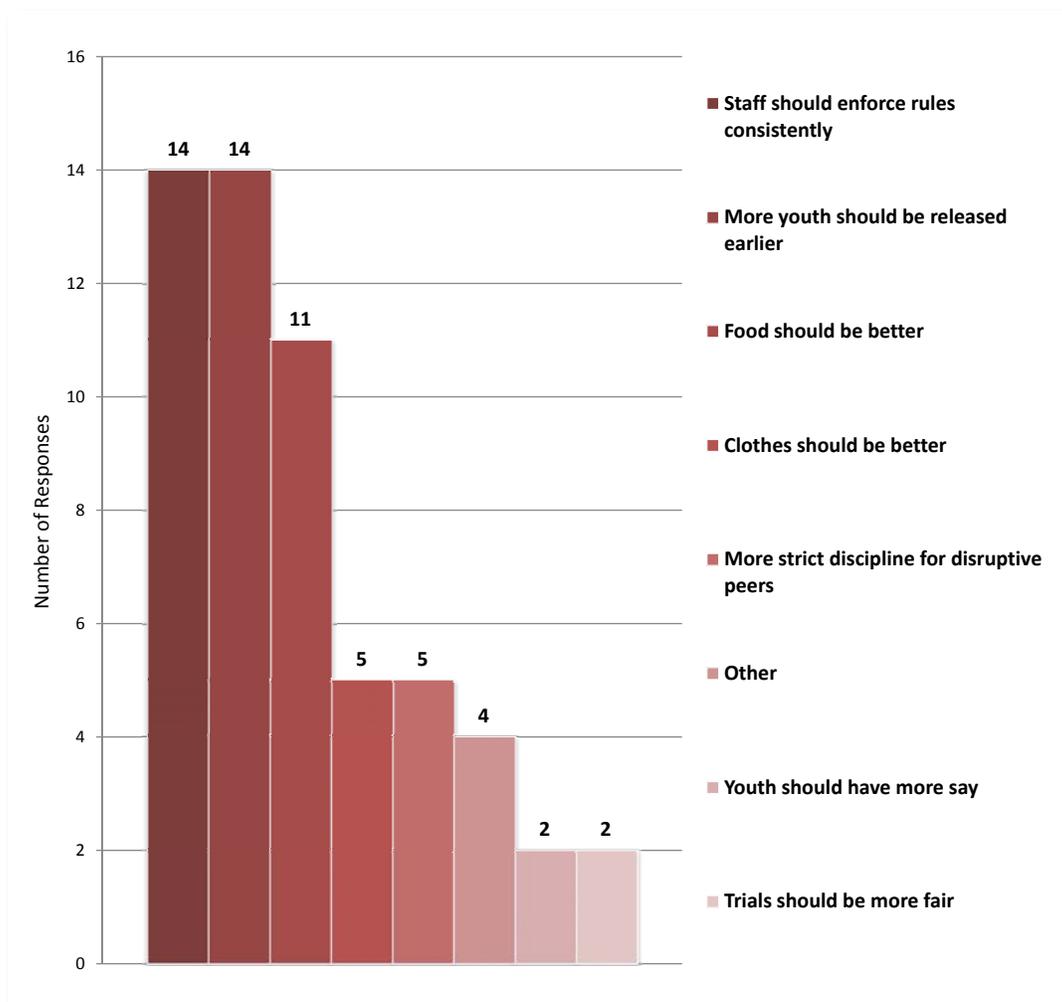
“The drug program pushes religion on youth. I don’t want that.”

“CoNEXTions – there’s nothing really to it. ‘Be good, be quiet.’ That’s not really working any treatment nothing.”

IF YOU COULD CHANGE ONE THING...

(*Twelve girls in security seclusion were not allowed to participate in the survey)

If you were in charge and had the power to change one thing about the juvenile system, what would you change?



Representative quotes from youth interviews:

“Staff let some kids get away with life and death, but others go to security. It’s not consistent.”

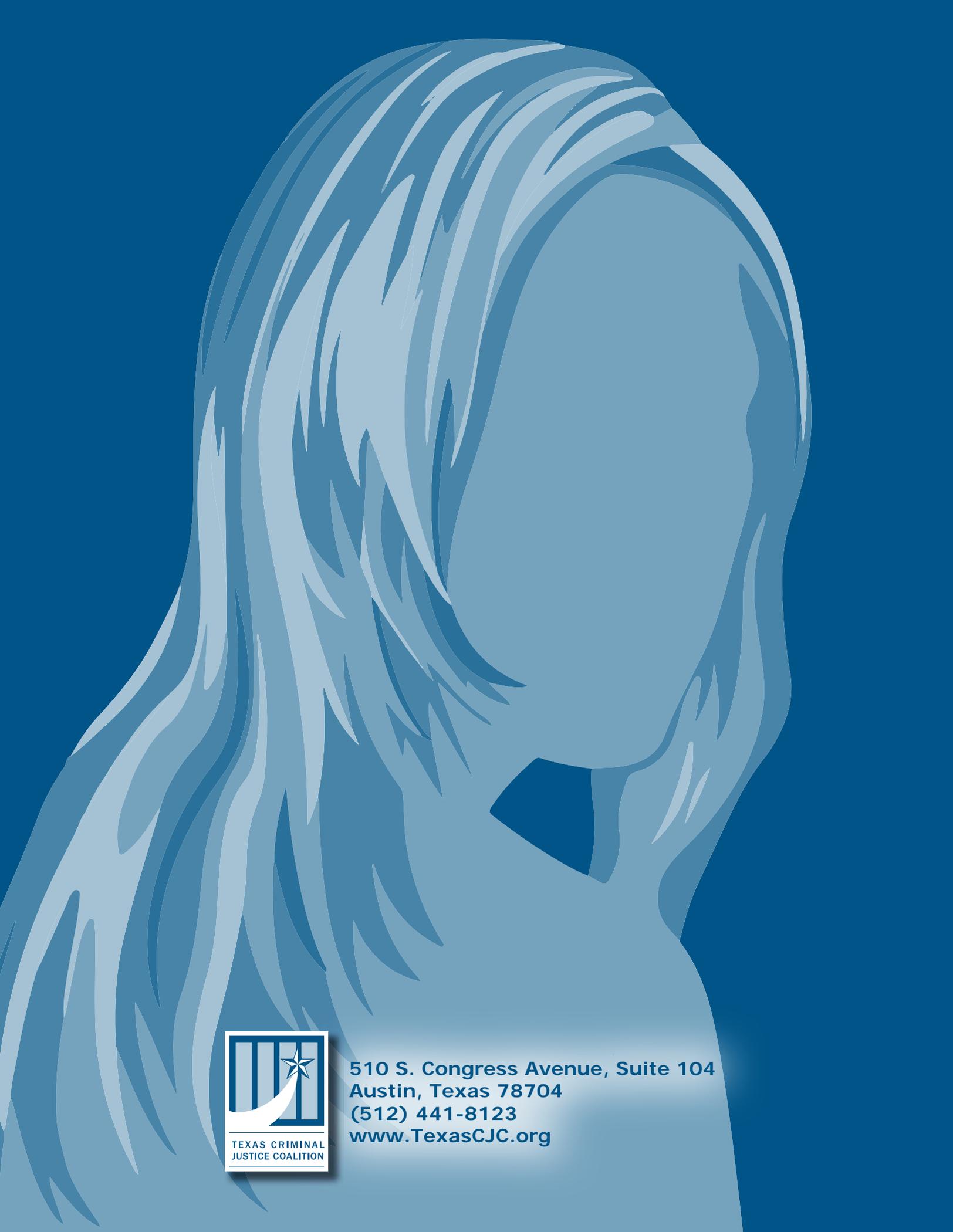
“I would change the way staff interact with us. They disrespect us. We’ve had staff fired for bringing in stuff that’s not allowed.”

“They should change the review release panel. They should just release at minimum length of stay. I would release everyone except people who have serious offenses.”

“They need to enforce the rules against disruptive girls.”

REFERENCES

- ¹ TCJC "Youth Experiences at Giddings State School: 2012 Survey Findings" (2012). <http://txju.st/GIDDINGS>
- ² E. Espinosa "An Evaluation of the Influence of Gender and Mental Health Needs on Juvenile Justice System Processing" (2011).
- ³ See, e.g., B. Perry "Examining Child Maltreatment Through a Neurodevelopmental Lens" (2009).
- ⁴ The National Center for Trauma-Informed Care and other organizations provide training to facilitate the implementation of trauma-informed care. <http://www.samhsa.gov/nctic/training.asp>
- ⁵ TCJC review of calendar year 2011 data provided by TJJD (April 2012).
- ⁶ National Alliance on Mental Illness "State Mental Health Cuts: The Continuing Crisis" (November 2011).
- ⁷ TCJC Survey of County Juvenile Probation Chiefs (August 2012).
- ⁸ TCJC review of calendar year 2011 data provided by TJJD (April 2012).
- ⁹ S. Grassian "Psychiatric Effects of Solitary Confinement" (2006).
- ¹⁰ Facility registry data provided by TJJD (January 2012). Additional data provided to TCJC by county juvenile probation departments.
- ¹¹ TCJC "Youth Experiences at Giddings State School: 2012 Survey Findings" (2012). <http://txju.st/GIDDINGS>
- ¹² See, e.g., Ryan & Yang "Family contact and recidivism: A longitudinal study of adjudicated delinquents in residential care" (2005).



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