

Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force
Youth Roundtable
October 8th, 2020

On October 8th, 2020, the Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force hosted roundtable discussion with 39 youth who have experience in the juvenile justice system. The meeting was facilitated by Task Force members Tiffany Sizemore, assistant professor of clinical legal education at Duquesne University School of Law and Dan Jurman, executive director of Pennsylvania's Office of Advocacy and Reform.

➤ ***Strengths of the Juvenile Justice System:***

- **Positive interactions with Juvenile Probation Officers (JPOs):** One youth shared that working with her juvenile probation officer (JPO) while on probation was helpful and educational. She shared that the positive relationship with her JPO helped her learn how to better communicate with others.

➤ ***Areas in Need of Improvement:***

- **Probation imposes a heavy burden youth and, as a result, often leads to out-of-home placement for small technical violations:** Youth spoke of onerous requirements imposed upon them through probation that were difficult to meet. A participant said even small failures to comply with intensive court requirements could lead youth to be removed from home on technical violations. "We need to stop probation," the youth said." Once you make another mistake—it can be anything—they send you back up [to placement]." Another youth said, "I feel like probation is a setup. I went through 14 months of placement to then come home to people calling me all the time, taking pictures of my homework.... They obligate you to do something you don't want to do, and if you don't do it, they're going to consequence you. Everyone's in your business—no privacy. My grandma is sick, my dad is on house arrest, [but] if we need something, no one is there for you. But if you aren't there [at an appointment] right away, you're in trouble. They already had me [in out-of-home placement] for 14 months, why do they need me longer?" Another youth described the social stigma of the house arrest requirement that he wear an ankle bracelet, stating, "Everyone looks at me, and say, 'oh he's a bad kid. I don't want him around me.'"
- **More alternatives to out-of-home placement should be made available to reduce its use:** The majority of youth suggested that the use of placements should be eliminated and replaced with alternatives. A youth stated, "I feel like the system isn't going to change. The fact that you want someone locked up and you expect them to change—don't expect them to change when you aren't treating them. Don't expect to see change from a youth when you're mistreating them, not treating them fairly. Treat them fairly, don't just lie about them. At the end of the day that hurts their person more." Another said, "there shouldn't be placements; people should be in the community," adding, "If we are going to have placements, then how can we restructure them so they are actually helpful?" Another participant said "delete the whole system. If there were more opportunities for everyone, there would be less problems and the crime rate would go down."

- **Youth experience physical and emotional abuse in facilities:** Participants discussed accounts of abuse and “inhumane” practices they witnessed in facilities. One youth said, “in placement, I would see them choking up some of the kids in my class because a girl didn’t want to return the chairs. I’d see a white guy choking up a girl. And when I’d try to speak out, they wouldn’t let me make phone calls.” Another shared, “I’ve witnessed staff hit a kid’s face, spit in a kid’s face, and then tell them to calm down. There were literally four staff to one kid and a knee on someone’s neck.” One participant said they’ve “worked with a number of girls who have been assaulted by a number of staff. It’s a place to hold you, not a place to help you.” Another person commented, “Both in the jails and placements I was in, they didn’t treat me right. They mistreated me. They held me in solitary confinement.”
- **Youth are often treated differently according to their race and gender:** Youth described disparate treatment in court and in facilities for youth of color. One said of another young person they knew in the juvenile justice system that “they adultified him because he was a big young black man. And they didn’t take into consideration that there might be a misdiagnosis or missed diagnosis of mental health. They looked at the fact that he was involved with [the child welfare system] for many years, that he didn’t have a stable home when they were considering his placement.” Another youth described troubling interactions between male facility staff and female youth. “One thing that needs to be changed is male staff with females,” they said. “Sometimes, I’ve seen male staff restrain a girl in nothing but a towel.” Another youth said, “I had to get fully nude to be searched. That was hard to go through. I had to put up a front as a bad guy just so I wasn’t perceived as being weak.” Finally, several youth shared the same feeling that nothing will change in facility conditions, even when complaints are filed, including one youth who reported that a facility staff member told her, “file 10,000 grievances, nothing’s going to happen.”
- **Eliminate the practice of charging youth in adult court:** Youth who were tried in adult court specifically recommended eliminating the practice. “I wish I would have gone to the juvenile court system because you know in the adult system they treat you as an adult,” one said, adding, “To drop down to juvenile [court jurisdiction], I had to plead guilty.” Another participant shared that, “One of the court rationales of going to the adult system is because the placement providers don’t have enough time to rehabilitate a young person. [But] placements [in the adult system] aren’t currently set up to rehabilitate young people. We’re saying if they can’t get rehabilitated in placement ... [Why are we] going to send them to adult court?”
- **Improve relationships between youth and juvenile justice stakeholders:** Several roundtable participants shared that they did not have positive interactions with judges, JPOs, and facility staff over the course of their involvement with the juvenile justice system. One participant commented that “judges like to shut children out and don’t like to have the children speak. [I] felt neglected.”
- **Justice system involvement leads to severe consequences for youth trying to obtain jobs, education and other life goals:** A youth said her sister applied for a job and was denied a job because of her record, adding “stop judging people for what they did in their past.” Another youth said, “from where I’m from, once you become a felon, it’s hard for you to get a job, to find

housing. It's a cycle. Once you get released, they want you to get a job, a house, etc., but once you're a felon, everyone labels you."

➤ **Notable quotes:**

- **On the lack of supports, resources, and recreational activities for kids:**
 - "A lot of young black people, in their communities, they don't have anything. No YMCAs, no community centers. They just see drug dealings and shootings around and they grow up with that stuff. Around the black communities, we need more gyms, YMCAs, fitness centers, playgrounds. When people get too bored, they do something dumb.
- **On the juvenile justice system, generally:**
 - The system is another form of slavery. It's the school to prison pipeline. We need to be proactive at this point."