

Walk in Our Shoes

Youth Share their Ideas for Changing
Connecticut's Juvenile Justice System



Introduction

In 2015, Governor Malloy announced plans to close the Connecticut Juvenile Training School (CJTS) by July 2018. The Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance (CTJJA) has advocated for the closure of this long-troubled facility and welcomed the Governor's announcement. However, the goal is not only to close the training school, but to replace this failed youth prison model with a more effective juvenile justice system; one that protects and strengthens all of Connecticut's communities and works to rehabilitate even the most challenging youths.

State leaders are asking, *what should replace the training school?* Yet, few are directing this question to the individuals who are closest to the problem and to possible solutions – the young people who had spent time at the Connecticut Juvenile Training School. So CTJJA partnered with the Youth First Initiative, to gather input and feedback from system-involved youth about community reinvestment, alternatives to incarceration and what young people need to be successful. During the spring and summer of 2016, four listening sessions were conducted with approximately 40 youth from Bridgeport, New Haven and Hartford. About one-third of the youth were female. Almost all of the young people had direct experience with the juvenile justice system; the majority had been incarcerated at the Connecticut Juvenile Training School, or had spent time at a facility for girls, and were serving or had recently completed parole. At each session, program staff familiar with the youth were also present and sometimes participated in conversations.

Although it was difficult for some young people to answer the question, *what do you need to be successful?* – perhaps because they had never been asked this question before – other young people were preternaturally self-reflective and insightful about what could make a difference in their lives and in the lives of their communities. This report summarizes some of their ideas and recommendations.

Format of the Youth Listening Sessions

The same format was used for the four groups and each session consisted of three parts:

- 1) **Ice Breaker** — Each session began with an icebreaker called *Seeking Common Ground*. This exercise helped the facilitators and young people learn a little bit about each other as well as gave everyone a chance to relax, move around, and have some fun.
- 2) **Community Reinvestment Discussion** — The youth were asked the following questions: 1) How much do you think it costs to incarcerate one youth in the Connecticut Juvenile Training School for one year? 2) How would you spend the \$319,000 instead of incarcerating a young person at CJTS? 3) How should the state invest the \$53 million it costs to operate CJTS?
- 3) **A Walk Through the System** — A floor map of the juvenile justice system was laid out depicting the different stages including arrest, court hearing, detention, trial, sentencing, probation, placement and parole. Young people were encouraged to explain what happened to them as they moved through the system and what different intervention or alternative approaches the system should offer at these various stages in the system.



Recommendations for Community Reinvestment

The youth were universally shocked to learn that the annual cost to incarcerate one young person at the Connecticut Juvenile Training School in 2015 was \$319,000 per youth. When asked about better ways to spend this money, they spoke about re-investing those dollars to stabilize their housing and to revitalize their under-resourced communities. They also highly prioritized creating more opportunities for youth through employment and employment readiness programs, and initiatives that expose youth to new experiences.

Recommendation 1: Invest in housing and community revitalization projects in under-resourced neighborhoods

Youth in Bridgeport, New Haven, and Hartford all recommended that the state reinvest money in housing and cleanup projects in their communities.

When asked about how they would spend the money currently spent on incarcerating youth in CJTS, many young people immediately mentioned their desire for safe, affordable housing for themselves and their families.

Although some young people expressed that they wanted to move out of the community to get away from gangs and violence, others recognized the connections they had in the community and articulated aspirations to improve the conditions in their neighborhoods to not only better their own lives but also to enhance the quality of life for the lives of their peers and neighbors.

Many of the young people said that they wanted to improve the streets in their communities. They talked about having to carry trash for blocks to find a garbage can – people in their neighborhood have to work really hard to NOT litter. One youth in the Hartford listening session referred to the Dutch Point housing project (that was razed and rebuilt with affordable single-family homes and green spaces) and said: “What they did to Dutch Point – do more of that.”

Several young people specifically recommended that the state reinvest money to improve education and fix up dilapidated school buildings in their communities.

Recommendation 2: Invest in job programs that offer youth skill-building opportunities

Throughout the listening sessions, a popular response from youth when asked how to reinvest money from CJTS was “jobs”. However, the youth were clear that they did not want just any job, but rather a source of employment “that would help you get on a career track and would help you get work experience.” For example, a girl in Hartford said she wanted to become a nurse and would be interested in a paid internship in a hospital. One young person in New Haven said there should be more programs where young people could go to school part of the day and work for the other half of the day– so young people are able to learn while they are acquiring a skill and getting paid.

Several young people spoke about pressure to go out and make money to help their parents, who were overwhelmed with financial issues, as motivation for their unlawful behavior. As one young man in Bridgeport said, “Help me make money in a positive way.”

This individual was 22 years old and currently not in school or employed. He explained that it was hard to develop a work ethic and understand how to be in a work environment when prison didn’t help him gain any skills, incentive, or experience doing that. Programs for youth should provide job readiness training as well as on-the-job training and experience – and pay them for both. Young people do not always have the option to participate in educational programs or unpaid internships, because they need an immediate source of income to meet their and their family’s basic needs.

Youth recommended that the state reinvest some of the tax dollars saved from CJTS’s closure in supported work, apprenticeships, internships, and other work programs that would not only allow youth to earn money but also to build meaningful skills, training, experience, and opportunities to start small businesses or learn a trade. The young people also suggested that there should be more programs in schools to bridge education and work – programs to help students create a plan to get in to college or trade school, or provide guidance on how to find a job after high school or college.

Recommendation 3: Invest in neighborhood programs that expose youth to new experiences and activities that help them find and build on their interests

A number of young people talked about wanting youth centers, dance clubs, or sports leagues that offer things to do after school. “We don’t want to just sit around after school and do homework and work. We want to do fun things – have a game room, have a place where people can dance, where we can have free time. Expose me to new and different things, it shouldn’t just be a continuation of school.” Likewise, in another session, young people said that neighborhood programs should offer youth something to do and look forward to such as art and crafts, music, photography, frisbee tag or “any other type of fun activity that got you out of your house and off the streets.”

Youth in Hartford who participated in the PeaceBuilders program said that similar programs should be available to young people in other communities. They described how the program exposes them to positive experiences: “They take us on field trips – go karts, Six Flags, Yankee Stadium, out of town to college tours for like a week... they let us participate in things like this forum...they help us to be involved in the community.”

When speaking about how to invest in neighborhood programs that expose youth to new experiences and activities, one young man said, “if you are stuck in the system you get **hopeless** and you don’t know what else is out there, so if there were clubs and groups to go to and people to talk to and actually tell you what exists, that would change circumstances for a lot of people.” A young person in one of the Hartford sessions said that young people in the community need access to more confidential anti-gang groups to help show kids that there is a way out of gangs and to help them create a plan to leave gang life.

 *Several young people pointed out that they should not have to get in trouble to have access to programs.*

Often, involvement in the justice system connects youth to opportunities or assistance that they would not have otherwise received. A young woman in Bridgeport talked about her job at Marshalls and said she felt guilty because she had a job, while her friends who had not gone through the juvenile justice system could not get one.



Recommendations for System Change

As young people “walked through” their experiences in the juvenile justice system, they acknowledged the need for accountability and consequences, but also spoke about wanting the system to provide more fair, balanced and individualized responses designed to address the reasons that they became involved in the system.

Recommendation 4: Provide system-involved youth with mentors who are credible messengers as an alternative to incarceration

At one of the Hartford sessions, youth talked about participating in programs like Scared Straight and said that these types of programs did not work and only made them madder.¹ One young man said he started crying after being fingerprinted and yelled at by inmates in an adult prison. He wished that instead of taking him to a prison, the program had invited men who had been incarcerated to visit his schools or community program to talk about their experiences and answer questions. This young man would prefer, as did other kids in the group, that these programs offer a mentoring and counseling approach instead of yelling and harsh treatment.

Throughout the listening sessions, many youth talked about the significant impact of important adults in their lives. The young people were very emphatic that they want to be around adults who want to be around them *and* who both understand and have been through the things they are dealing with. They want mentors from their neighborhoods, their backgrounds, and their set of circumstances who have succeeded. There was also a feeling that mentors need to have training to do the work with youth.

The young people noted that mentoring goes both ways because the youth benefits from being matched with a strong positive role model and the mentor him/herself gets some money in their pocket; then positive things are happening in that community and funds stay in that community. A good number of the youth in these sessions did have this kind of mentor in their life, many through their juvenile justice programs. There was obvious respect and love from the youth for that adult in their life that understood their situation, had been in their shoes, and had found a way to prosper.



The Connecticut Juvenile Training School | photo: Google Earth

Youth talked about needing the adults in their lives to help them figure out what to do when your back is against the wall. They asked for training around how to deal with situations before they escalate. They also expressed needing someone to call to get help in those tough moments. One young woman said that when she ran away to avoid going to detention, she called her probation officer (PO) for help. The PO's advice was, "Turn yourself in." She did not find that helpful because turning herself in meant going to detention and she did not want that. The officer's response was simply: "Do this or you are going to jail." She shared that the reason she was violating the conditions of her probation was due to her substance abuse issues, but she did not get drug treatment. The probation officer may have been following what he/she was mandated to do, however, the young person needed more guidance, advice, counseling, and assurance that she was heard and that her needs could be met.

Recommendation 5: Offer support to parents and family members

A young woman in Bridgeport shared that it would be helpful for the system to offer programs for parents – such as training around parenting. She said, "My mom and I had a lot of problems because she did not know how to work with me." Since her mother did not know how to discipline her, she began exhibiting problem behavior: "My mom asked me what the problem was given that she lets me do whatever I want — and I told her 'yeah, that's the *problem*'."

Another young woman explained programs that work with the entire family are helpful because "There is a background to why things happened. It would be helpful to have someone to help the youth and the family figure out not just the now, but the before."

If you're angry, you get your anger from somewhere. Otherwise, you go away, do the programs and then come back home. But if you get your anger from stuff at home and that hasn't been dealt with", then things are not going to change. There was discussion that services that offer parenting help to families should be supportive and voluntary rather than mandatory and punitive towards those asking for the help.

Recommendation 6: Integrate system-involved youth in positive youth development programs that give them a chance to mix with peers who are not involved in the juvenile justice system

Many community alternative-to-incarceration and re-entry programs are set up so that all the youth who have been arrested or incarcerated are kept together. Young people had strong feelings that system-involved youth should have the opportunity to participate in community programs where they can interact with young people who have not been involved in the justice system. One boy who had been in CJTS said, “When people are all together who all have anger issues you just are going to have a ton of fights.”

Another youth said, “Don’t just keep all the kids who have been incarcerated together. Don’t make them feel they are together because they are all messed up. You can also learn from other people’s experiences – so by talking with you, I might find out that when you did that thing you got locked up, so I don’t want to do it.” The non-system-involved youth can help with the young people who are system-involved.

One girl spoke about how she had to end friendships with people because they all still smoked marijuana and she needed to be clean in order to stop violating probation. She wanted to be drug free, but had to choose being lonely and without her friends over smoking marijuana. She wished the juvenile justice system offered her the opportunity to meet and be around peers who were a positive influence.

One of the staff people accompanying the youth, who had been incarcerated as an adult, said that people who are street wise may be “fronting” and not want to open up at all, but when they are put together in a broader, more diverse group they can see it is safe to open up a bit. They can see other ways to deal with the challenging circumstances in their lives, and they learn there is a way out and that they can find a way to pursue that path.

Recommendation 7: Seek to eliminate racial and ethnic bias at every stage of the justice process

Youth were acutely aware of how a young person's race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status not only determine a young person's access to opportunities but also how he or she is treated within the justice system. For example, one young woman said that the overwhelmingly white community where she lived "didn't know what do a with a black girl." She felt that if she were white, her school and community would have sought to help her and address the underlying reasons for her behavior, rather than refer her to court. She explained that she was put on probation for truancy because she was struggling with her schoolwork and had started skipping school. While on probation, she tested positive for marijuana use and was placed under more restrictions. She eventually went to detention, ran away, assaulted officers trying to bring her back to detention, and finally ended up committed delinquent and sent to residential placement. She said that if the schools or the justice system had provided her with a tutor instead of probation then she wouldn't have been pulled deeper into the system.

In one of the Hartford listening sessions, there was a lively discussion about the disparate treatment between white youth and youth of color in the justice system. One girl of color said, "white kids never get arrested until they go and shoot up a school!"

Another young person, also of color, agreed saying, "Those people who shoot up schools don't ever look like us!" In the middle of this conversation a boy, who is white (and the only white youth in all three listening sessions), broke into the conversation and said, "Guys, guys, this race stuff is totally true. I caught 15 cases before they ever put me in detention for two weeks, and some of them were for assault, etc."

When youth were asked what could be done differently, some of them said, "I don't know, nothing." When a more specific questions was asked, "If you lived in a white suburb near here would things be different?" they said, "Sure. Those people have money." They knew there was a different reality, but didn't believe it could apply to them. Whether the differences in treatment and opportunity exist because of racial and ethnic or economic disparity (or both), the youth were keenly aware of the existence and impact of disparities in treatment in their own lives.



The Connecticut Juvenile Training School | photo: The CT Mirror

Recommendation 8: Create small, residential programs for youth that offer individualized treatment and instead of punishment

The young people were split about their experiences in CJTS. There were some young people in the New Haven and Hartford sessions that said being locked up in CJTS was a wake-up call to turn their lives around and taught youth there were consequences for their actions. However, other young people in New Haven, as well as the youth in the Bridgeport and Hartford sessions, spoke about how their time in CJTS harmed them and made them feel angrier and more isolated. One young man said, “CJTS made me get worse – it is just filled with people who test you and test you — and you pick up more cases [charges] when you respond.” Another young man also said that he was glad he went to CJTS because he “went in soft and came out tough.” However, when another young person asked him, “But did you have to get that tough?”, he responded, “No.”

Both young men and young women talked about inappropriate behavior and language from staff people at facilities or in programs towards the youth. One young woman wished that staff she dealt with had been more professional, caring, and had actually helped to rehabilitate her.

Almost all the young people believed that youth who commit serious violent offenses should be separated from the community. However, many youth said that these residential programs should seek to help kids get better rather than institutionalize them. Youth mentioned that if a kid really needed to be removed from his community for a period of time because of something he did, instead of going to jail/prison, he should be able to be on house arrest or at least see his family and attend therapy. They thought that this would be more of a therapeutic and rehabilitative intervention instead of locking him away.

Youth spoke about the need to provide individualized services – such as mental health care and drug treatment — tailored to the young person’s specific needs and circumstances. Other youth suggested that residential programs should provide life skills, education, and job training. Another recurring theme was need for residential programs to teach skills that lead to careers, not just short-term jobs. Youth also said that they need help developing the “soft skills” they will need to get and maintain jobs and advance in their careers, such as professional communication, confidence, stress management, teamwork and patience.

The youth also agreed that residential programs should provide incentives such as giving youth a monetary reward at the end of the week or the chance to go home on the weekends. One young man had an idea for a different kind of therapeutic

group home. He envisioned one that would combine youth and older folks to create community and family ties. Everyone would be learning together about what it takes to raise a family and be a successful member of a community. This type of program would create a kind of village within the “community group home” setting.

One young woman said, “Don’t institutionalize kids at all. You just end up with kids getting “institutionalized”. If I tried to tell you all that time in institutions didn’t change me I’d be lying. It changes your whole thought process. Also, I learned the system and how to work the system. If I’m in jail and I don’t go to school in jail – then I get 12 hours of punishment. So I get out of school anyway...The system stops being scary and it stops working. The negative consequences they use to change behavior stop having an impact.”

Acknowledgements

Mishi Faruqee of the Youth First Initiative and Abby Anderson of the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance drafted this document with assistance from Christina Quaranta, Lara Herscovitch, Jill Ward and Carmen Daugherty. As much as possible, the authors tried to capture and summarize the comments and words of the young people without editorializing or altering the content. We would like to thank the following individuals and organizations that hosted the listening sessions and invited youth from their programs to participate: Catholic Charities of Greater Hartford’s FREE, COMPASS Youth Collaborative PeaceBuilders, Integrated Wellness Group VETTS, LifeBridge, RYASAP’s Street Safe Bridgeport, Youth Continuum’s FREE, and those individuals and organizations who wish to remain anonymous. Most importantly, we would like to thank the young people who participated in the sessions for sharing the experiences and insights with us.

Notes

1.) After a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized field trials between 1945 and 2011, Anthony Petrosino and colleagues concluded that 'programs like "Scared Straight" are likely to have a harmful effect and increase delinquency relative to doing nothing at all to the same youths. They did not recommend it as a crime prevention strategy. Petrosino A, Turpin-Petrosino C, Hollis-Peel M, Lavenberg JG. "Scared Straight and Other Juvenile Awareness Programs for Preventing Juvenile Delinquency: A Systematic Review," Campbell Systematic Reviews 2013: DOI: 10.4073/csr.2013.5

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