

Bay Area Youth Participatory Evaluation Project

FINDINGS AND SUMMARY

**YOUTH AND
FAMILIES BUILD
SOLUTIONS TO
TRANSFORM
CURRENT
DIVERSION
PROGRAMS
TOWARDS A MORE
JUST OAKLAND**



Special thanks to:



The Bay Area Youth Research Advisory Team

Swai Lakai



Swai has been doing community organizing for approx 3 years. She has worked with Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ) as a Dream Beyond Bars fellow and currently works the community office associate and has also worked with many other community organizations to impact her community.

Xochtil Larios



Xochtil is a youth justice coordinator with Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ) located in Oakland, California. She is currently working with our policy department implementing policy passing bills at a state and local level. And we work closely with our local Juvenile Justice Center

Zouhair Mussa



Zouhair is Sudanese/Nubian-American community organizer and multi-disciplinary artist from West Oakland. His art is based on the life he has lived and aims at addressing that which is detrimental to him and his community. He seeks to shed light on injustices that plague the places he calls home.

The YPE research team was recruited in the Summer of 2023 and included youth from the Bay area. The project was guided in partnership by Dr. Reina Rodríguez from Evaluation Studio and Alliance for Girls from September 2023 to March 2024. The research team met virtually twice weekly throughout the duration of the project.



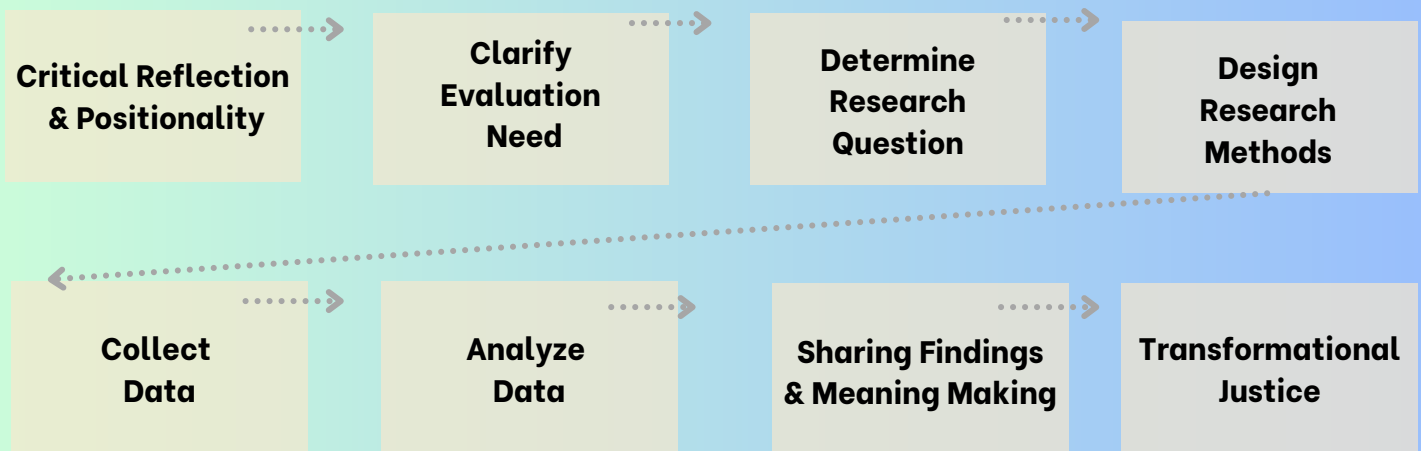
What is YPE?

Youth Participatory Evaluation is a youth-led research and evaluation approach engaging young people in evaluating the programs designed for them. The evaluation design, instrumentation, and analysis are completely driven by youth in partnership with adult facilitators.

Research Question

What do youth with offenses need from a diversion program to achieve restorative justice? What do their families need from a diversion program to achieve restorative justice?

YPE Process



Research Methods

After considering all the methods, we decided focus groups were the most beneficial because they were similar to talking circles. A lot of community-based organizations use talking circles as a method of connection with other individuals. We felt confident that we could get the community on board to discuss their needs with each other. Talking circles don't center the researcher or the interviewer. Reframing focus groups into something familiar helped because there is distrust when it comes to research. After all, research in the past has harmed us and our communities.

Agreements from Youth Researchers

We believe that language matters. Early in our meetings together, we wanted to be intentional about how our language impacted youth and the families that we were going to be in connection or community with and we came up with these agreements. We hope that you can also uphold these agreements while reading our findings summary. We know that currently implemented diversion programs involve police as the first point of contact, however, we need to dream beyond bars.

- It is important to us that when we speak of youth impacted by the juvenile justice system, we extend **respect** to them and their experiences. We do not call youth “offenders,” as many diversion programs do. We say “youth-at-risk” or “youth with offenses.”
- We **uplift** community-based knowledge that is central to understanding their needs.
- We **listen** openly with the intention to understand.
- **Challenge** ourselves to think beyond police.

A Note on Diversion

As the research team, we understood that people might not know what was meant by diversion programs, because many local community organizations function as diversion programs, but do not call themselves diversion programs. That’s why it was important for us to approach this research being mindful of how these programs are named and how they label youth. We found that many official diversion programs call us offenders, but we didn’t want to use that harmful term. However, we did want to be in conversation with youth-at-risk. This became the language that we used to identify youth that were going through diversion programs, so that youth with offenses could achieve restorative justice by any means. We opened up the question so that we can understand what youth and their families also need to be free from all types of systems.

Demographics of Participants

3 focus groups

Group A: 5 participants

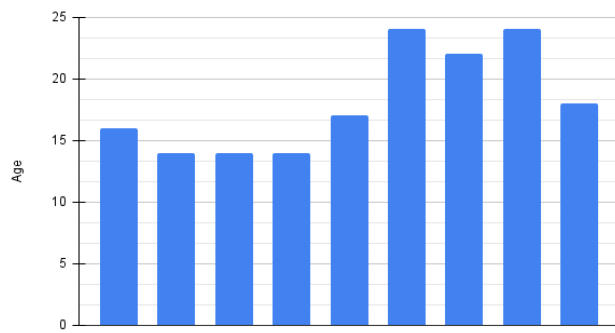
Group B: 4 participants

Group C: 11 participants

Youth

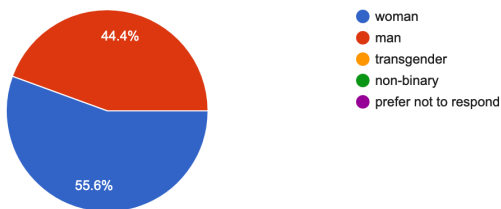
- Ages 12-24
- Youth involved with the juvenile justice system
- Currently living in Alameda County or Contra Costa County

Age



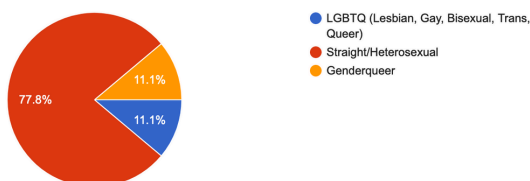
Gender

9 responses



How do you identify?

9 responses

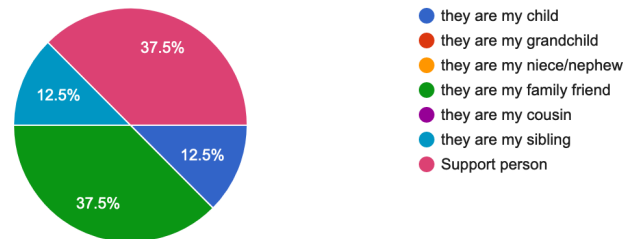


Family

- Family of youth selected to participate in the focus group
- Actual ages represented: 25-60

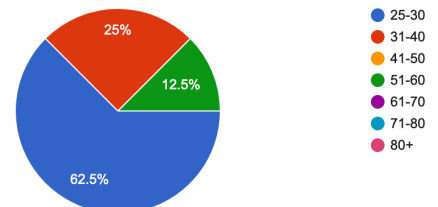
What is your relationship to the youth participant?

8 responses



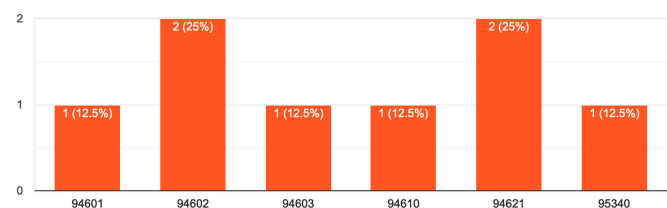
Age

8 responses



Zip code

8 responses



Key Findings

After conducting three focus groups, we found that youth ages 14-24, and family and community support folks aged 25-60 need connection, community, and positive initiatives that support re-imagining rewarding systems so that they feel included and not punished. Families must also be part of youth case plans because they believe in different accountability measures to complete restorative justice.

Some of the themes we identified were:

- **Mental Health Support.** Our research team identified that feelings matter. Youth participants spoke about needing somebody to talk to and having a place to be. Our team understood this as a need to move away from punitive punishment models and toward support and connection models. Other participants mentioned needing somebody to talk to and many of our participants mentioned needing a therapist.
- **Community and Connection.** Youth participants also spoke about giving back to their community after causing harm. Within the family and caretaker circle, they discussed needing a safe place for their older children where it gave them something purposeful to do and a place to chill. We believe youth have demonstrated great effectiveness in addressing the traumas at the root of risky behavior. The closer you are to the problem, the closer you are to the solution. Locking youth up in a cell is not the answer to addressing the root cause rather it causes youth and their families further harm.
- **Rewarding Positive Behavior.** Youth participants want to find ways to reward people for good behavior. Positive incentives were a recurring theme. One participant mentioned that a previous diversion program staff “doesn’t know how to speak. They are hella disrespectful up there. It’s like jail.” We understand this as a need for respect and dignity for all youth-at-risk regardless of their past offenses. Allow youth to be storytellers of their lives rather than judging or holding a bias against them.
- **More Programming and Resources.** Youth and support folks consistently mentioned needing more programs with various activities. We heard folks mention receiving support and help while also getting the chance to have fun, allowing them to feel connected with their community.

Community Voices

Mental Health Support

“I would say first responders, honestly, like fire department and I think they should have more training on mental health because I don’t think the police is meant for that...”

“...it’s easier to put mental health people saying that they’re being crazy, put them in the system locked up so they can get the money for them to be in there. So it’s kind of like they could avoid that and make it better instead of them going to jail for something that they can not control or their lack of medication or something that they can get help on.” -Participant 5

“I think some people really need somebody to really talk to and really listen.” - Participant 3

“I was going to say some people need therapists just to get some problems off their head.” - Participant 1

Community and Connection

“When I don’t really have anything productive to do with myself, I recommend that I come here [CURYJ] because it keeps me out of trouble. And from the time that I was in this community for a long time, I would just say just 24 hour focus group, even though that might not be possible because people get tired. And just for us all to like... Even if there isn’t a focus group, we could come together on our own and speak on some stuff that we really need to talk about in this community because like we need help for real.” -Participant 13

“I think resources for kids, activities like sport activities or music classes. But for grown up, maybe gathering and meditation or just ask how was your week and stuff like that.” -Participant 14

Community Voices

Rewarding Positive Behavior

“I think also we need to find a way to reward people for good behavior, because I feel like in our community, a lot of times the negative behavior is what gets rewarded” -Participant 6

“Having a positive incentive that’s good for the community and exchange for change of behavior.” -Participant 8

More Programming and Resources

“I would say more programs, as well. And having spots for kids to go to, because I know it’s like... you’re young, so you don’t really know a lot. And it’s good to know your community when you’re young so when you grow up, you know those people. And it’s not in a violent way. It’s like, ‘I know him.’ ...Not even programs, just a spot.” -Participant 5

“More funding. But specifically I’d say for stuff to help kids go to school more...some type of a carpool program for kids who don’t have rides to school and stuff. You’re more likely to go skip and do some other stuff if you have to walk a super long way. You meet up with someone on the route (because) having to go through certain neighborhoods that they might have problems in or just not good areas”
-Participant 6

“I would say that more opportunities and funding for transitional age youth starting from age 13. There should be more after school programs or programs to where you could be able to either work part time or just learn basic employment. Because there’s never any programs like that. It’s either a after-school program or it’s more like a club type of thing, but it’s never an early to job employment” -Participant 8

Community Voices

Beyond Policing Systems

When asked what how we might show healing and accountability when harm has been caused, Participant 14 stated, “I’ll probably say I will not call 911. I’ll ask them why they are breaking and if they need money, I’ll probably just say ‘Here is 100, don’t break the car.’ And try to relate and just show them kindness and try to relate with them. Because so many people, they have so many different reasons to commit crimes. And some of them because they couldn’t get a job with the red flag if they have a felony. And some people they just don’t want to work, that’s the easy way out, you’d rather go rob other people. So I think you just have, I don’t know, when you show people kindness and the care and it depends how you behave or treat them, they can, some of them, they can change, almost all of them, I don’t know.”

“I probably feel like the system really doesn’t work and I would probably change instead of the criminals put them to jail, just to involve them into work, new skills, give them music and stuff like that. And I probably give more resources and opportunity to the people so they don’t have to go that route to begin with because when people are deprived from their rights and resources and opportunity, they have no other option. Then the jail and the prison, it just get the worst out of the human being, that’s just not the way to go.” -Participant 14

“I feel like jail and institutions are only created to really unfocus us more. So mine’s would look like peace. I would create it to be peaceful for people to get a peace of mind so that you don’t go more crazy. And I don’t feel like the institutions that we have created already through the system are peaceful enough so people go to jail and get in more trouble ... So I would make sure that if I had my own institution or anything like that, it would be to actually better people and make them feel like they’re wanted in life... So I just would say that I would create peace because that’s really all some people need is peace.” - Participant 17

Recommendations

The Youth Participatory Evaluation (YPE) team led a solution building workshop in April 2024. Below are their recommendations as well as recommendations from the solution building session

More community support and connection, more mental health support for youth and families.

More programming and intentional support BEFORE diversion is even needed.

Focus groups or town halls held regularly with food and other basic support needs.

Positive rewarding opportunities for youth. Like inviting youth to be a part of projects like this one.

Affirm and center youth voices (and their families) when finding solutions.

Support can include community therapists, counseling, programming and potential support before diversion is even needed. The community needs and wants more programs for the youth and the whole community such as focus groups, town halls, block parties, regularly with food and other basic supportive needs. Some other ideas can be like a “scratch and fade” day where the community comes together to receive free haircuts, get their nails done, gets free massage, community therapy or meditation,

Solutions to Action

Senai G, community member:

“I feel like some ways we can make this (support) happen would be to stop the punitive behaviors of the penal state, and focus more on the rehabilitation—like that “R” they added at CDCR (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation)? I was at CDCR when they added that “R” and they just added the letter and didn’t follow through any of the shit they said they was gonna do. I think focusing more on the rehabilitation, or just in general, outside of like incarceration, having locations and centers, that are conducive to, you know, meditation or alternative healing or just rec centers that are healthy and well maintained, secure, politics stay outside door. That will be really helpful.”

Needs

- Mental Health Support
- Community and Connection
- Rewarding Positive Behavior
- More Programing and Resources

Solutions

Policy and government representatives must do better to provide youth-at-risk with supportive opportunities and an ear to hear them out.

Funders, foundations, and organizational donors can contribute by supporting through opportunities for youth to participate in building solutions toward restorative justice, funding more focus groups, community activities and other resources.

Conclusion

We found that youth, families and support people need connection, community, mental health support and positive initiatives that support re-imagining rewarding systems so that they feel included and not punished. Family and support folks must also be part of youth case plans because they believe in different accountability measures to complete restorative justice. Youth need to feel heard and respected as they move toward accountability. Community matters to the folks we spoke to and consistent resources and activities can help facilitate holistic support before diversion is needed.