

Insights From the Elevating Youth Voices Project

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Over the past two years, the [Elevating Youth Voices Project](#) examined how schools and community-based services collaborate to support justice-involved youth in Wisconsin by collecting data from both young people and the adults who work with them. The research team partnered with youth researchers to support the study and make meaning of the data. This project was inspired by Participatory Action Research methods and the voices of young people were central to the study methods and findings.

This study highlights the critical conditions that young people need to thrive such as: trusting and supportive relationships, physical and psychological safety, clear and fair structure, and meaningful opportunities for skill-building.

For more information on positive developmental settings, see [Features of Positive Developmental Settings \(Table 6.1\) From the National Academies](#). The findings also outline how system-level coordination—across schools, justice agencies, and community providers—are essential for creating the consistent, connected supports that young people need but do not always experience in practice. Drawing on interviews with young people and the adults who support them, findings from this study surface key insights for meeting the needs of justice-involved youth.

FINDING 1

Prioritize building trusting relationships with youth.

Youth, and adults supporting youth, emphasized that support worked best when adults took the time to listen without judgment, believe what young people shared, and stand up for them when needed. For some youth, the relationship mattered more than the specific program structure. Youth valued having autonomy, transparency, and adults who were willing to advocate for them—not just refer them to services.



Youth: “I wish that more people believed what kids were saying and what they were going through. ...[Y]ou’re there to take care of ...the kids or the young adults and ... be their backbone and support that they need. And to me, that’s more than just providing them other services. It’s, you know, standing up for them when they need to be stood up for.”



Youth: “My [case worker] she was like a best friend almost. She was like a friend, a companion, somebody I could talk to or do anything with, play games, go out to eat, go to the mall, have fun. And like...she’d work on my goals with me too. Like it was very helpful.”



Adult: “You can, you can be a wonderful worker, but if you don’t follow up with what you say you’re going to do, then there’s, there’s no point, because once that trust is broken, it’s broken. So just making sure that whatever we discuss is actually followed up on. If I say I’m gonna come on a Tuesday, I come on a Tuesday, day. So it’s just making sure that, like, that consistency and the, the bond is not broken.”

Policy and Practice Recommendations:

- Invest in relationship-based practice including staff training on youth development and continuity of care.
- Center youth voice and shared decision making in program design and allow for youth customization of services.
- Focus on manageable case loads for staff.

FINDING 2

Create safer spaces for young people that include fairness and consistent accountability.

Youth described feeling unsafe in programs where staff were unprepared, rules were inconsistently enforced, or adults were not held to the same standards as youth. For example, youth shared examples such as being around other young people fighting and being in a car with staff who were under the influence of drugs and alcohol.

At the same time, some youth found clear expectations and fair discipline helpful when applied consistently and respectfully. Safety and structure were viewed as supportive—not punitive—when implemented equitably.



Youth: “They disciplined me right and they were fair with their discipline.”

Youth: “Even though it was forced, I learned my lesson even though it helped me and I don’t want to go back there still because I know what I did was wrong.”

Policy and Practice Recommendations:

- Strengthen safety and accountability standards including staff background checks, sobriety policies, and consistent and equitable rule enforcement.
- Provide opportunities for young people to share their experiences with program leadership staff to ensure that feedback around problematic behavior is reported.

FINDING 3

Deliver meaningful, flexible, and holistic supports.



Policy and Practice Recommendations:

- Fund holistic and flexible services that include mentoring, employment supports, and life skills.
- Shift away from compliance-driven services and more toward supports that demonstrate meaningful, youth-defined outcomes.
- Shift toward restorative systems, or systems that seek to heal and improve young people’s skills, and shift away from punishment-style approaches.

Youth wanted services that produced real change rather than surface level or misleading support, and adults noted the importance of restorative systems that don't just focus on punishment. Youth emphasized the need for options (one-on-one and group support), mentors, employment and life skills assistance, and longer-term engagements. Programs were viewed as ineffective when they offered generic referrals, short check-ins, or unclear services that failed to address basic and longterm needs.



Some young people suggested services that they would like to see, such as more one-on-one talks, having a mentor, and job training.

Some young people felt like the services were surface level, misleading, or not helpful:

- “It felt like nothing changed.”
- “When I bring it up... it's like, ‘Oh, I don't know how to help you...Even after giving her a few months... I still haven't gotten answers.’”
- “Honestly, nothing... it was very much like you just check the name and went in.... It's super quick, like wasted time sometimes quick.”
- “They don't help with resources.... It's just what we found on the internet. That's not real help.... Here go figure it out yourself.”
- “When I bring it up... it's like, ‘Oh, I don't know how to help you.’”

Young people also talked about the importance of building skills that fostered growth and confidence:

- “My caseworker taught me to speak up about things that aren't right.”
- “She was like one of the people that made you like excited to do new things, you know? So like trying to like work on stuff, she made it exciting and helpful, you know, like something you wanted to do and look forward to.”

FINDING 4

Expand and institutionalize school-based reentry supports.

Adults who support youth identified school reentry as a critical moment for youth returning from justice system involvement, yet they noted that schools often lack the staffing, training, and infrastructure needed to support successful transitions. Dedicated reentry staff positions were described as both effective and rare. Even large districts rely on only a small number of personnel to coordinate reentry across many schools.

To address these gaps, some practitioners have developed tools such as reentry guides, meeting templates, and staff resources to help institutionalize support practices. However, these efforts are often informal and limited by unstable funding. Interviewees emphasized the need for broader investment in dedicated school-based reentry roles and training for school staff so that responsibility for supporting youth is shared system-wide rather than concentrated in a few individuals.

Policy and Practice Recommendations:

- Train staff on supporting justice-involved youth.
- Consider hiring staff as reentry coordinators.

FINDING 5

Strengthen and align cross-system coordination to support youth.



Adults who support young people described the importance of cross-system collaboration. Systems should invest in and institutionalize cross-system coordination among schools, justice agencies, and community providers by expanding dedicated coordination roles, formalizing shared structures (e.g., memoranda of understanding, committees), and aligning philosophies and goals across systems.

Although formal coordination mechanisms exist, they can be undermined by insufficient staffing, fragmented funding, and inconsistent buy-in across partners. Differing approaches to youth—particularly punitive versus restorative frameworks—can further limit collaboration.

Policy and Practice Recommendations:

- Develop formal relationships across systems (i.e., between schools and community-based programs).

Note: Images are by Franco Zacha at Justice System Partners: <https://justicesystempartners.org/franco-zacha/>.

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