



POSITIVE YOUTH JUSTICE INITIATIVE BRIEF

ORGANIZING FOR A HEALTHY JUSTICE SYSTEM

HIGHLIGHTS OF YOUTH INVOLVEMENT

The Positive Youth Justice Initiative (PYJI) is helping communities across California transform juvenile justice practice and policy into a more just, effective system that is aligned with young people’s developmental needs. In 11 California counties, PYJI supports community-based organizations that are working in partnership with grassroots organizations and youth and family members most impacted by the juvenile justice system. Each coalition has tailored its community organizing and advocacy activities to the policy context in its county. Together, they are accelerating a statewide movement toward a healthy juvenile justice system – focused on youth well-being, improved system practices and reduced justice system involvement.

ENGAGING DIRECTLY IMPACTED YOUTH IN ORGANIZING FOR JUSTICE REFORM

Youth who become justice system-involved subsequently are vulnerable to various outcomes that can negatively impact their quality of life. These include reduced likelihood of high school completion, decreased lifetime employment earnings, and an increased chance of becoming systems-impacted as an adult.¹ Community-based organizing strategies that engage youth both before and after justice involvement seek to curb negative pivots in adolescent development and into adulthood.

Engaging youth who are directly impacted by systems in advocating for reform allows them to control the narrative about their own lives, directly reach policymakers, and highlight where changes need to occur. By uplifting youth voices and recognizing them as experts through their lived experiences, young people become the agents of defining, shaping, and making change.² Through organizing and advocacy work, young people increase their skills and knowledge and enhance their social-emotional learning (such as developing strong relationships with peers and adults), all of which will position them for success as adults.³ This success can be seen in such areas as improved mental health, educational attainment, and employment outcomes.⁴

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN PYJI

Over six months in 2018, PYJI youth from the communities that experience the highest rates of juvenile justice system involvement engaged in actions that will contribute to transforming the system.

The following numbers, reported by the PYJI partners, illustrate that engagement:

- Youth in local PYJI coalitions: 529
- Percentage of engaged youth who are system-involved: 56
- Youth engaged in:
 - Leadership development: 432
 - Organizing and advocacy: 346
 - Research: 130

In a focus group, youth expressed what they learned through their PYJI involvement. Some examples of their responses include:

- “How to advocate for my community—speaking up and being heard.”
- “Political education. We know things don’t work, but if you don’t know where to go with your solutions or how to implement them you’re not doing anything. I learned to be a more effective organizer.”
- “When I realized some of the things I go through, it’s not my fault. Realizing that my parents never got the opportunity to heal. I thank PYJI for that.”

BUILDING SKILLS FOR ORGANIZING AND ADVOCACY

Conducting Research

PYJI youth gained research and leadership skills through gathering evidence and support for their advocacy positions. Youth from organizations such as Fathers & Families of San Joaquin and RYSE Youth Center reviewed information about their school district’s spending for on campus law enforcement and developed and presented policy recommendations on this issue to their local school board. Both Fathers & Families and RYSE Youth Center report that their school board subsequently did not designate a specific funding source for campus police and security.

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). Through YPAR, young people collaborate with adult partners to identify a problem or issue affecting their community, conduct research on it, and develop actionable recommendations. Youth engaged with various PYJI partners developed and conducted innovative

YPAR projects on the harms of youth incarceration and the need for healing-centered alternatives,⁵ the human and financial costs of youth incarceration,⁶ navigating systems to create self-determined futures,⁷ and gender- and sexuality-based violence and bullying.⁸

Communities United for Restorative Justice (CURYJ), in partnership with Urban Peace Movement, engaged a group of formerly incarcerated youth—known as the Dream Beyond Bars Fellows—in an intensive research process to identify and advocate for alternatives to justice system involvement. The fellows built life skills as they learned to do research, wrote about and shared their findings, and organized around community-based alternatives. This work led to advocacy as the fellows began spreading the information they had collected and advocating for changes that would lead to better conditions and outcomes for their peers.

Public Speaking

PYJI youth enhanced their public speaking skills through participation in a range of community forums. Youth from Fathers & Families of San Joaquin and from RYSE Youth Center gave public comment at school board meetings to advocate for school climate reform. Youth working with Sacramento Area Congregations Together spoke at school board meetings in support of ending the district’s contract for school resource officers.

Youth also gave input on a plan to establish a county Office of Youth Diversion and Development in Los Angeles County, presented at a San Francisco Board of Supervisors’ hearing on costs and harms of the local juvenile justice system, and provided feedback to the state Racial and Identity Profiling Advisory Board on addressing racial profiling by law enforcement.

PLANTING SEEDS FOR ADVOCACY: BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS

Drawing on skills such as research, public speaking, and leadership, PYJI youth compiled and presented data, shared personal testimony, and advocated for improvements to the local youth justice system. These activities helped youth build relationships with local elected officials and discuss various issues in their meetings with officials.

AREAS INFLUENCED BY PYJI YOUTH

- Elimination of fines and fees in the juvenile justice system
- Impacts of mass incarceration on youth
- Investing in counselors instead of law enforcement on school campuses
- Personal experience in the juvenile justice system
- Racial profiling by law enforcement
- School climate reform
- Summer jobs, summer camps, and transportation for youth

Youth working with Resilience Orange County (OC) identified the key stakeholders in their community and engaged them. For example, youth gave input to the City of Santa Ana's new police chief on the philosophy that will guide the police department's practices. Youth helped organize and participate in candidates' forums for the city council and school board. They also conducted research and developed youth budgetary priorities for the City of Santa Ana. Resilience OC reports that these efforts helped influence the city to allocate more than \$2.5 million toward youth investment for a recent budgetary cycle.

ACHIEVING VICTORIES THROUGH ORGANIZING AND ADVOCACY

PYJI youth helped organize and participate in candidates' forums and town hall meetings for local elections. They conducted voter engagement activities on issues that would benefit young people and their communities.

Through meetings with elected officials, attending hearings in Sacramento, making phone calls, writing letters, and creating media pieces reflecting personal experience, PYJI youth supported progressive youth justice advocacy and educational campaigns at the state level.

The organizing and advocacy efforts supported by PYJI have led to multiple victories. One accomplishment that reaches

across the initiative is the recognition of youth as community leaders. PYJI youth gained seats at numerous policymaking tables that impact decision making related to juvenile justice or education, including the West Contra Costa Unified School District Local Control Accountability Plan Community Committee, Los Angeles County Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council, Orange County Juvenile Justice Commission, and Santa Ana Unified School District School Climate Committee (Orange).



Fathers & Families of San Joaquin is experienced in engaging youth to advocate in ways they feel will positively impact their communities. Youth who work with Fathers & Families have advocated for implementation of legislation to help decriminalize foster youth, participated in voter engagement efforts in the greater Stockton area, and spoken at meetings of the Board of State and Community Corrections regarding funding for community-based diversion programs for youth. Fathers & Families reports a strong relationship with the local chief of probation. Having an ally in the probation department has given the youth a unique opportunity to advocate in their communities and work for change in a positive way.

CONCLUSION

The organizations that participate in PYJI have been successful in engaging youth and having youth take the lead in juvenile justice reform and advocacy. A common thread connecting many of the youth involved in PYJI is personal experience with the juvenile justice system. Through this involvement, the youth have identified how the system affects young people in traumatic ways with lasting negative impacts. Through their PYJI work, youth have gained a voice, learned new skills, and become community leaders for system-impacted youth and their local communities.

POSITIVE YOUTH JUSTICE INITIATIVE COUNTY LEAD ORGANIZATIONS

- Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ) (Alameda County)
- Fathers & Families of San Joaquin
- Fresno Barrios Unidos
- Resilience Orange County
- RYSE Youth Center (Contra Costa County)
- Sacramento Area Congregations Together
- San Diego Organizing Project
- Sigma Beta Xi Inc. (Riverside County)
- Silicon Valley De-Bug (Santa Clara County)
- Young Women's Freedom Center (San Francisco County)
- Youth Justice Coalition (Los Angeles County)

EVALUATING PYJI

The National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) is evaluating the current phase of PYJI and has prepared four briefs to highlight findings and learnings on some issues that PYJI partners are addressing. The evaluation draws on multiple sources of quantitative and qualitative information, using existing data from funded partners'

semi-annual progress reports, reviewing other sources, and collecting primary data at scheduled PYJI activities. Through the evaluation, NCCD has produced findings that The Center at Sierra Health Foundation and PYJI's philanthropic partners can use to support communities in strengthening local infrastructure for organizing and advocacy toward a healthier justice system.

END NOTES

- 1 Aizer, A., & Doyle, J. (2013). *Juvenile incarceration, human capital and future crime: Evidence from randomly-assigned judges*. National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper. doi:10.3386/w19102
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- 3 American Youth Policy Forum. (2017). *Supporting pathways to long-term success for system-involved youth: Lessons learned*. Author; Shah, S., Buford, W., & Braxton, E. (2018). Transforming young people and communities: New findings on the impacts of youth organizing. Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing.
- 4 Shah et al., 2018.
- 5 Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice and Urban Peace Movement. (2019). *Dream beyond bars report: A youth vision for Alameda County's juvenile justice system*. Retrieved from Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice website: http://www.curyj.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/DBB-Report-2_compressed.pdf
- 6 Fathers & Families of San Joaquin. (2018). *Who pays: the true cost of youth incarceration*. Available at <https://youtu.be/ftWhuVZp3Fc>
- 7 Melendrez, A., & Young Women's Freedom Center (2019). *A radical model for decriminalization: Research model and initial findings*. Retrieved from Young Women's Freedom Center website: <http://ywfcresearch.org/A-Radical-Model-For-Decriminalization.pdf>
- 8 Villa, B., Wright, D., Ruiz, P., Boonnam, L., Lyman, L., Escobar, K., & Tilley, L. (2018). RYSE Youth Center: Youth participatory action research. *Journal of Family Violence*, 33(8), 597–604. doi:10.1007/s10896-018-9996-x