

Community Convenings: Reimagining Investments in Illinois' Youth

Does the Illinois youth prison system only punish or does it improve the behaviors of young people?

Is confinement in a prison cell ever an effective solution to youthful offending?

Can you imagine a more effective way to rehabilitate youth and improve community safety?

Those are some of the questions discussed during 33 community convenings with 388 youth, parents, teachers and staff from community organizations in the nine counties that commit the most youth to the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (IDJJ). The Children and Family Justice Center (CFJC) hosted the convenings in partnership with local organizations between September 2018 and March 2020. (See the Appendix for details on the convenings' composition and methodology employed.)

A majority of the community convening participants said that prisons fail to rehabilitate youth or provide them resources to enable a successful

return home. In imagining a different system, participants emphasized that young people should have as much of an opportunity as possible to maintain their ties with the community, aided by the support of increased rehabilitative programming. Participants also stressed the importance of reinvesting the IDJJ budget in community resources including: development of community centers, after school programs, and parent and family resources. Such investment would help to prevent children from becoming court involved in the first place.

The following themes from the community convenings emerged:

- ❖ Recognize that Prisons Don't Make Us Safe or Rehabilitate Youth
- ❖ Create a More Effective Juvenile System
- ❖ Cut the State Prison Budget and Invest the Savings in Services to Youth in their Communities
- ❖ Ask Communities What Services Are Needed to Help Youth

In This Issue:

- ❖ Insights from 33 convenings in Illinois communities that send the most youth to state youth prisons
- ❖ Participants identified problems with scarce resources to support youth in their communities, racial disparities, and lack of youth rehabilitation inside lockups
- ❖ Participants expressed interest in more personalized and effective responses to youth behavior and community-directed investments in lieu of incarceration spending

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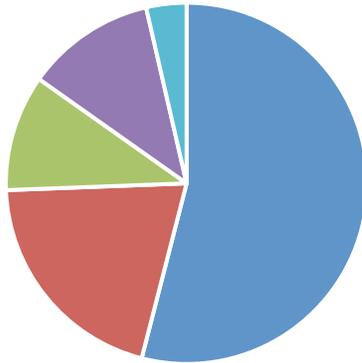
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Recognize that Prisons Don't Make Us Safe or Rehabilitate Youth

Nearly all convening participants expressed that youth incarceration did not improve community safety or rehabilitate youth. Participants said that instead of being supported, youth are being lost to a system that fails to treat them as individuals.

"I think IDJJ is like the miscellaneous drawer everyone has in their house, because it doesn't have a place, its own place in the house where you just throw everything in that drawer. That's what it seems like. Instead of just dealing with it and putting it where it belongs, it just gets stored."

Race/Ethnicity of Participants



■ Black ■ Latinx ■ Not Reported ■ White ■ Biracial

Although the Illinois Juvenile Court Act requires a rehabilitative setting for court-involved youth, participants explained that IDJJ was inherently punitive instead of reformative and failed to treat kids as kids.

"You lock them up, you strip them of their life, their resources, their opportunities, and then you release them back into the world like they're supposed to know what to do!"

Nobody is born to hurt someone else.

"I think, even in the most violent cases, these kids are still just that, kids. Nobody is born to hurt someone else. I think these kids need somebody to believe in them...They need mentors, they need people to be there consistently. It takes a village to raise a child."

Participants who had been incarcerated described being locked up in highly fortified, isolating prisons, with long stretches of time spent idle in their cells. This isolation was exacerbated by the fact that many families cannot afford to miss work or the cost of transportation to visit youth incarcerated hundreds of miles from home.

The distance – that's the harsh thing...

"You stay in the room, you only get four hours out during the day. You get two hours in the morning shift, and two hours in the second shift."

"I feel like this is just preparation for big jail. This is high school and Stateville is college."

"The distance – that's the harsh thing, a parent won't want to travel all the way out there, even to St. Charles."

Some participants noted that educational opportunities, job training and counseling in youth prisons were inadequate and hampered the youth's ability to successfully transition back to his or her community.

It's like a warehouse ... just simply holding them until they are released. And then when they get back out they're even more mentally ill because of the trauma associated with being locked up.

"They're not getting the proper education, they don't have any schooling or training in there so that if they do get out they can't get a successful job because they don't have a skill."

“We live in a country where most of the people who are incarcerated suffer from some type of disability ... most of them need mental health treatment. ... It’s like a warehouse ... just simply holding them until they are released. And then when they get back out they’re even more mentally ill because of the trauma associated with being locked up.”

Many convening participants identified the racial disparities that permeate both youth incarceration and earlier points in the juvenile system.

“It’s something that concerns me about a high percentage of Black children in general that are going to prison. It’s too many.”

In most groups, participants were concerned about the impact of incarceration on mental health and noted that failing to provide mental health care hurts rehabilitation.

“When I was incarcerated, I had both depression and anxiety. Being in there, you feel like, ‘I can’t do this shit.’ ... It will make you worse than you were.”

In every group, participants felt that the juvenile justice system was ineffective at rehabilitating youth and keeping them from future system involvement. The only benefit participants identified was temporarily removing youth from the dangers in their communities.

It looks like they invest a whole lot in trying to discipline the youth rather than treat them

“You gonna just keep him institutionalized and they just sit up there doing the same things, like fighting. What are you teaching him if they’re in there doing the same thing that they was doing on the outside. Only thing stopped is him getting killed on the outside quicker.”

“Yeah I know a few people who went to an IYC, but they got out, and they were bad again. They ended up right back in.”

“It looks like they invest a whole lot in trying to discipline the youth rather than treat them. ... You mean to tell me that it’s more important for you to try and apprehend a youth rather than educate them and explain to them why it’s important for them to behave correctly?”

Create a More Effective Juvenile Justice System
Given the pervasive dissatisfaction with the youth prison system, participants were asked to imagine a fair response to a child who committed crimes. Participants described a different approach to youth justice that emphasized the importance of 1) understanding a youth’s motivations prior to determining consequences and 2) finding ways to increase safety by resolving persistent issues.

If you are young and you are doing stuff like that, the problem isn’t only you

“I feel like they should ask, ‘Why did you rob that store?’ ‘well my family got denied whatever we needed,’ or, ‘there’s not enough money coming in,’ or ‘I am living in a certain neighborhood’ ... well, obviously they aren’t asking us any questions, so it’s like, you robbed the store, you are going to jail and that’s it.”

“The fact is if you are young and you are doing stuff like that, the problem isn’t only you, the problem is the society you grew up in. And that’s the truth! The truth is how did a 10-year-old get a hold of a firearm, that’s not totally their fault!”

“When people can actually take the personal approach then all of a sudden they’re creative, before they said, just send them to prison. But if it’s me, maybe some therapy, maybe some community support. Maybe thinking creatively about which solutions can really help.”

“What she had said about the cycle, and that the same things keep happening and happening. There has to be a root cause, underneath, deep down what’s really going on that keeps everything happening. Find the root cause and stop it, and do something about it.”

Find the root cause and stop it, and do something about it.

When participants considered how the justice system should respond to crimes, they emphasized the value of providing meaningful opportunities to process and heal from their behavior.

“I think restorative justice is a great way to solve conflicts. Why don’t we have a sit down with them, talk it out, ask what’s going on? Restorative justice is not saying that we can’t hold people accountable. Hold them accountable for their actions, but also try to understand what’s going on and see if you can help!”

“Especially for things like drugs and alcohol, I feel like it should be you’re drinking, let’s get you some help, not let’s put you in a cell for years.”

Cut the State Prison Budget and Invest the Savings in Services to Youth in their Communities

When the convenings began in September 2018, Illinois was spending over \$190,000¹ to incarcerate a youth for a year and was failing to invest in communities and support early intervention programs. Participants were angry,

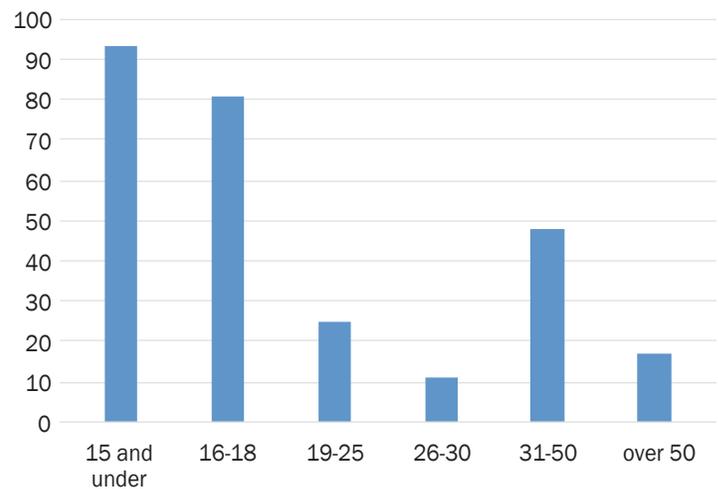
[Y]ou’re telling them that the only time they’re worth anything is when you are locked up with all of your rights stripped away from you?

disappointed and frustrated that so much money was being spent on youth incarceration—instead, they wished that this money could be reinvested

to benefit under-served communities that would prevent incarceration.

“Why is it that I have to shoot somebody to be worth \$12,000 a month? But me, in the real world? I can’t even get a LINK card. I can’t get health insurance. If I go to the hospital tomorrow and I get shot up, do you know how much money I’m going to have to owe when you’re sitting there putting so much money into a person in prison?”

Age of Participants



“And then you’re telling them that the only time they’re worth anything is when you are locked up with all of your rights stripped away from you? Most of these facilities are packed with Black and Latinx youth, and those are the communities that are most under-resourced. We don’t have any resources for our kids, there is nowhere for our kids to go.”

“I mean it just doesn’t make sense and so I’m getting pissed off looking at all of this data because I’m like, if we did the work on the front end then spending this money on the back end wouldn’t even be necessary. Particularly if we look at who’s being incarcerated, Black and Hispanic kids, we stuck that money like they do in the White neighborhoods, we won’t have as many kids going to these facilities.”

Some participants acknowledged that available resources have declined over time.

“A lot of kids can feel well protected at home, but still feel like a prisoner in their own community. ‘Oh, we can’t go to the park because they doing things, oh we can’t ride our bikes because they doing that.’ I think back in the olden days they used to have where the whole community met up and see what could they do and help out in the community to make the community better. They need to bring that back, too.”

Participants explained that reinvestment efforts need to be community-driven to ensure that the needs of impacted communities are addressed.

“The community needs to know what is going on, we need more resources, more jobs, more places for kids to go. You go to the South Side and there is nothing, you have to tiptoe around to even find somewhere you can go to use the bathroom, let alone somewhere for kids to go when they get out of school. ... All they know is what’s around them ... death and gang violence and gun violence.”

“I also think we have to make sure that every single neighborhood, every environment has resources that really allow kids to thrive—whether that’s parks or programs, after school programs, healthcare services, making sure that every kid has access to those things. And there are some neighborhoods that have all those services for kids, but it’s not equal.”

A primary focus for many convening participants was improving the quality of education and vocational services.

If all these programs could be based at the schools, I think that would help us put the focus on the child and have that trickle off to the families, into the community and be a grounding source to pull us all together.

“I would definitely also invest in schools, and making sure everyone has adequate resources in schools for learning.”

“If all these programs could be based at the schools, I think that would help us put the focus on the child and have that trickle off to the families, into the community and be a grounding source to pull us all together.”

“I know there were a lot of schools ... that had what was it, the cooking classes and all that other stuff just in case you needed to find something that you wanted to do instead of school. ... We should bring this back because it actually helps.”

Expanding access to extracurricular activities and providing opportunities that broaden the youth’s horizons beyond their neighborhood was also a priority for many convening participants.

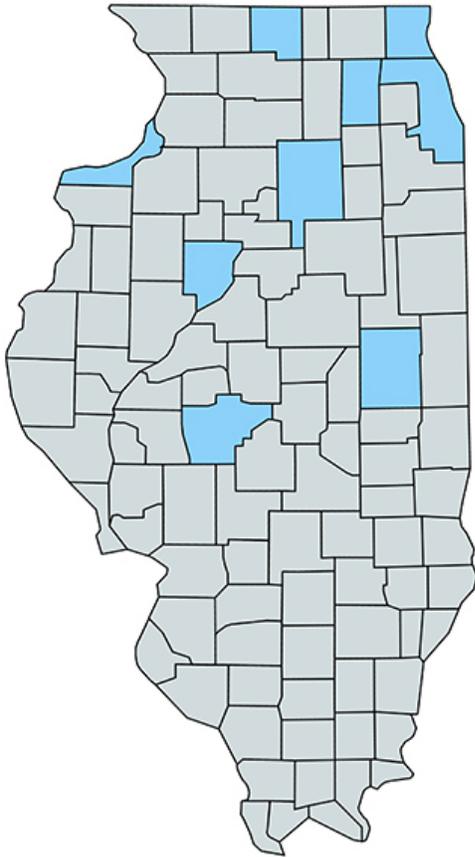
If there were more resources for these young people it would be better! In the summer we could go to Indiana or join a Boys and Girls Club. That’s crazy—there should be stuff out here.

“I think that we should find things that interest that specific person, get them what they want. ... If a kid likes sports, do sports, if they like art do art, just keep them busy.”

“If there were more resources for these young people it would be better! In the summer we could go to Indiana or join a Boys and Girls Club. That’s crazy—there should be stuff out here.”

“To my knowledge though, when the kids were in the program they would take them all around Chicago because they did a survey and found out that half the kids who live in Chicago had never been downtown, they have never been out their neighborhood. ... That could open doors for them. Just being outside their neighborhood and seeing different things.”

It may inspire them to be better, you never know, just letting them have that freedom to explore gives them a lot.”



Convenings were held in the nine counties that commit the most youth to the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice

Participants also believed that expanding mentorship opportunities would improve the positive outcomes for youth.

“The mentor should have the same background as the youth to be able to connect with them and really give them some good examples like what would happen.”

“We just need mentors. And not mentors that are policing, but mentors that are giving affirmation to you that they aren’t making mistakes but only experiencing growth.”

“You gotta know the right people. You say your son wants to be a fireman. If he knows firemen, I think it would be beautiful if you ask - take him to the firehouse. He gonna see Black firemen in here that lets him know he can do this.”

Expanded employment options would improve both finances and future opportunities.

“There should be employment for the youth as well. When I was a youth coming up, I started working at 12. They had these programs, the CETA programs, when you were still in high school you could work a job. It wasn’t a whole lot of money, but it was something to keep us off the street.”

Ask Communities What Services Are Needed to Help Youth

Convening participants identified several key areas where community reinvestment is particularly needed, including: household support and access to medical and social services.

A. Household Support

Participants discussed how lacking basic needs, such as shelter, beds, and clean clothing, impacts system involvement.

“Without being able to meet their basic needs, kids have to act like grown-ups and it’s tough, it can be very rough. I feel like kids need to be kids, they don’t need to act like adults.”

“A kid never made the school for two weeks, coming to find out they didn’t have transportation.”

“If you had a minimum wage job that was \$21 an hour, you could afford your housing. That’s what it’s going to take and if you have a minimum wage job with benefits. You could have time off, you could go to your boss and say ‘hey look at I’m having an issue at school.’ You could be home at 5 o’clock to make dinner for your kids. You wouldn’t have to wait until midnight when you get off work. These

parents are not seeing their kid, there is no parenting time available.”

“You get in trouble in school, they send you home, and you’re in the house, so you’re not in trouble. You’re just sitting at home because your mama is at work. You ain’t got nothing else to do. You can’t stay in the house by yourself so you hang out in the streets... Everybody say it’s a village, but the village ain’t all the way 100% there like it used to.”

Many also discussed the need for parenting resources and supports.

There was no resources for me to turn to say, “You know what, my kid is involved with a gang, what do I do? How do I pull him out of that? What’s my next step?” And I’m telling you, I looked! I sought people out, there was no one there.

“I will tell you when my son got in trouble, and I’ve said this, that there was no one to turn to. There was no resources for me to turn to say, ‘you know what, my kid is involved with a gang. What do I do? How do I pull him out of that? What’s my next step?’ And I’m telling you, I looked! I sought people out, there was no one there. Maybe they should put some money towards prevention, somehow.”

B. Access to Medical Services

A majority of participants noted that kids in their communities have unmet mental health needs often the result of trauma and that these unaddressed needs contributed to kids ending up in the justice system. Some participants felt that Black and Latinx youth are held to a double standard. Violence is treated as a mental health issue in white communities, but not in theirs.

“We think about mental health when it’s a white school shooter, but we don’t really think about the mental health of Black people when they are doing stuff, so I do think that you should be sent off somewhere but to a place that can help.”

“Why can’t we as Black people have mental illness? In our community you hear so much and see so much, I guarantee you over half of these children in this building are suffering from PTSD. So why isn’t that looked at when it comes to a Black person.”

“I was just saying I agree with that, we don’t get to have feelings, emotions, we don’t get to feel angry, sad, depressed, we don’t get to have mental health problems, we don’t get to have schizophrenia, bipolar, we don’t get to have none of that. We’re just ‘killers’ and ‘thugs.’”

“They don’t have access to therapy. They don’t have access to healthcare, mental care, or emotional care. Like so many people who need a shoulder to cry on....”

[W]e don’t get to have feelings, emotions, we don’t get to feel angry, sad, depressed, we don’t get to have mental health problems, we don’t get to have schizophrenia, bipolar, we don’t get to have none of that. We’re just “killers” and “thugs.”

Participants also felt that kids in their communities often experience trauma that goes unacknowledged.

“These kids are going through so much in their everyday life that is not being addressed. These kids need love, they need support, there needs to be a system, and I think a lot of that starts with understanding. We have to acknowledge the trauma that these kids are going through. ... I think we have to stop seeing these kids who made these mistakes as savages and threats to society.”

Despite the prevalence of such trauma, participants identified numerous obstacles to successfully accessing treatment.

“There is stigma. ‘We don’t need counseling, we too strong for this.’”

“Dealing with a lot of kids in the community for the past couple of years, we run across a lot of families who, in their eyes their children don’t have any problems. They’re too proud to admit that maybe their youth needs some mental health help to deal with their problems, and a lot of times they brush it off. ‘No, not my son or my daughter.’ ... And that gets instilled in the kids, and when they grow up, it makes them rough around the edges. They’re tough as leather, and they lash out and do things that they normally wouldn’t if there was the right type of services to help them.”

“For us in this community, we are limited because of the type of insurance we have. If you can’t afford it, you not gonna get it. I think that is something, I think mental health treatment should be there and there shouldn’t be a limit.”

C. Access to Social Services

Convening participants uniformly identified the negative effects of insufficient community resources on youth behavior. In every convening, participants stated a desire for increased community-based opportunities that would allow youth to have positive outlets and social-emotional support. Participants felt that investing in structural supports, such as community and reentry services, would make neighborhoods safer, reinforce the value of individual children and reduce justice system involvement.

In every convening, participants stated a desire for increased community-based opportunities that would allow youth to have positive outlets and social-emotional support.

When asked to design their own system, one participant stated, “I built a little community center, and I named it the ‘Kid Zone,’ and the reason for this is for the kids itself can go to a place and feel safe. So I did multiple rooms, and it teaches them valuable life things. Like this room, I used the money sign to teach them about the value of money, budgeting and stuff. This one is the culinary room where they learn about what

they need to eat, the nutrients, everything to keep them going. Sports, whichever sport you prefer. Arts and crafts, because they express themselves in many different ways. Acting class, which you can allow yourself to be you, as well, and an emotional class, a place where you can express your emotions without being judged.”

“I would invest that money into community centers--- like safe havens. The centers would have a lot of stuff, like a gym where they play basketball or soccer and a workout center, and you don’t have to pay anything. They could just come 12 in the morning to 12 at night, whenever they want.”

Other participants felt that consistent programming would help youth stay busy and focused on positive behavior.

One youth suggested providing a struggling young person with a “boxing club so he could relieve all his stress that he has on his back.”

“I don’t want my kids to feel like a prisoner in their own home, so when they can’t do anything, from school to home, I want them to go out and be able, even in the Boys and Girls, they can learn new things, gymnastics, and arts and crafts, and stuff like that instead of being locked up. It’s like they being caged in, because you’re afraid to let them go out because you don’t know what’s gonna happen out there.”

Conclusion

Youth, family members, and staff who work with young people in the communities around Illinois that send the most young people to IDJJ are clear about wanting to increase safety through both community-led investments in prevention and healthy, age-appropriate responses to youth behavior.

Forthcoming reports will share insights from convenings conducted with incarcerated youth and prison staff and describe participants’ vision for necessary out-of-home placements in greater detail.

Acknowledgements

The community convenings began as a conversation among Children and Family Justice Center faculty, staff and students. After conducting one-on-one interviews with incarcerated young people and youth prison staff to inform previous volumes in our series *Community Safety & the Future of Illinois' Youth Prisons*, it became clear that we needed a comprehensive approach to ensure that the voices and wisdom of the communities most impacted by the youth prison system were heard. Thus the idea of convenings was hatched.

This report is the summation of two years of work developing the protocol, format, and approach; selecting the counties; finding and securing willing partners in each of the counties; training formerly incarcerated youth to be convening facilitators; organizing and hosting the convenings; transcribing the recordings; analyzing and categorizing the participants responses into themes and then writing the report. None of this would have happened without the incredible hard work, dedication and tenacity of Sarah Silins and Arielle Tolman—who spent countless hours managing every aspect of this project – no detail was too big or small for either of them. In addition, clinical fellow Anavictoria Avila expertly facilitated several convenings and clinic students Alexandra Kuske, Rebecca Rieckhoff, Emma Kurs and Stephanie Castillo were instrumental in coding and analyzing the convening transcripts.

Finally, and most importantly, we thank every person who participated in the convenings, sharing their stories, wisdom and in many situations, their heartache; the organizations who welcomed and hosted these important conversations; and the youth who co-facilitated convenings. We appreciate all of you.

Suggested citation:

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Endnote

¹ The cost estimate for FY 2019 was \$191,827 per year per child, for youth prison operation and maintenance, not including the cost of education, treatment, or post-release supervision. IDJJ's FY 2019 budget was \$120M, \$79.8M of which is devoted to facility operation and maintenance; the balance is devoted to aftercare release supervision (\$21.3M); education (\$11.5M); mental health treatment (\$5.4M); and substance abuse programs (\$2M). OFFICE OF GOVERNOR BRUCE RAUNER, ILLINOIS STATE BUDGET FISCAL YEAR 2019 (February 14, 2018) at 270-73. As of this writing, per capita costs have increased.

A total of 388 individuals participated in the 33 convenings summarized below.

Organization	County/Neighborhood	Participant Type	Number of Participants
Arrowhead Youth Center	Rock Island	Youth	11
		Staff	2
Aurora Township Youth Services	Kane	Youth	14
Aurora Township Youth Services (second convening)	Kane	Youth	12
		Staff	2
BBF Family Services	Cook: North Lawndale, Austin	Youth	10
Bethany Children’s Home	Moline	Youth	11
		Parents	4
Boys and Girls Club	Champaign	Youth	25
Boys and Girls Club	Springfield	Youth	10
		Staff	2
Center for Youth and Family Solutions	Peoria	Youth	5
		Staff	2
Conservation Corps	Waukegan		11
EarthHeart–Dulles Elementary	Cook: Woodlawn, Englewood	Mothers	6

EarthHeart–Dulles Elementary (second convening)	Cook: Woodlawn, Englewood	Mothers	6
		Staff	1
EarthHeart– Englewood Montessori	Cook: Englewood	Mothers	7
EarthHeart– Englewood Montessori (second convening)	Cook: Englewood	Mothers	6
		Staff	1
EarthHeart–Fiske Elementary	Cook: Woodlawn, Englewood	Mothers	14
EarthHeart–Fiske Elementary (second convening)	Cook: Woodlawn, Englewood	Mothers	8
		Staff	1
EarthHeart–I Grow Chicago	Cook: Englewood	Mothers	10
EarthHeart–I Grow Chicago (second convening)	Cook: Englewood	Mothers	12
		Staff	1
Enlace - East Side	Cook: Little Village	Youth	10
Enlace - West Side	Cook: Little Village	Youth	8
Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School	Cook: Humboldt Park	Youth	13
Good Kids Mad City	Cook: Woodlawn, Pilsen, South Shore, Calumet Heights	Youth	4

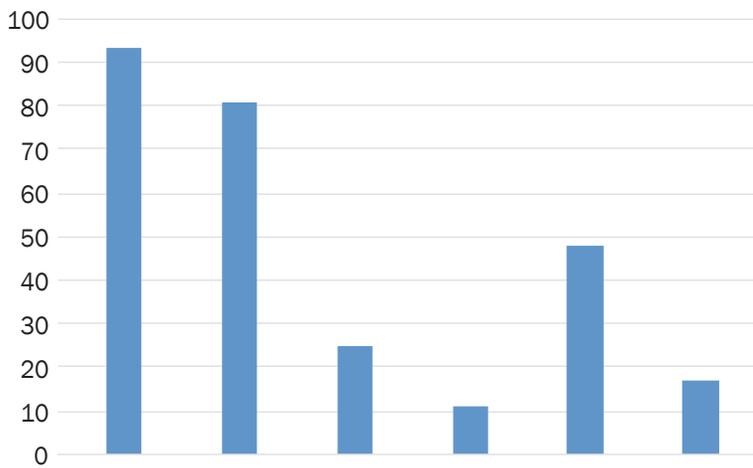
Howard Area Community Center	Cook: Rogers Park, Back of the Yards, Austin	Youth	7
Lawndale Christian Legal Center	Cook: Lawndale	Youth	12
Mikva Challenge—Juvenile Justice Council	Cook: Humboldt Park, Cicero, Englewood, West Pullman, Tri-Taylor, Bellwood, Logan Square, Fenwood/Roseland	Youth	12
Mikva Challenge—Juvenile Justice Council (second convening)	Cook: Humboldt Park, Cicero, Englewood, West Pullman, Tri-Taylor, Bellwood, Logan Square, Fenwood/Roseland	Youth Staff	8 2
Mikva Challenge—New City Council	Cook: New City, Back of the Yards, South Shore, Englewood	Youth	28
Mikva Challenge—North Lawndale Council	Cook: North Lawndale, Pilsen	Youth	13
Mikva Challenge—North Lawndale Council (second convening)	Cook: North Lawndale, Pilsen	Youth Staff	14 2
Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation	Cook: Englewood, Garfield Ridge	Mothers	7
Streator High School	LaSalle	Youth Teacher	14 1
Roosevelt High School	Winnebago	Youth Teachers	12 4

Roosevelt High School	Winnebago	Youth	12
		Teachers	3
Y.O.U	Cook: Evanston	Youth	8
		Staff	2

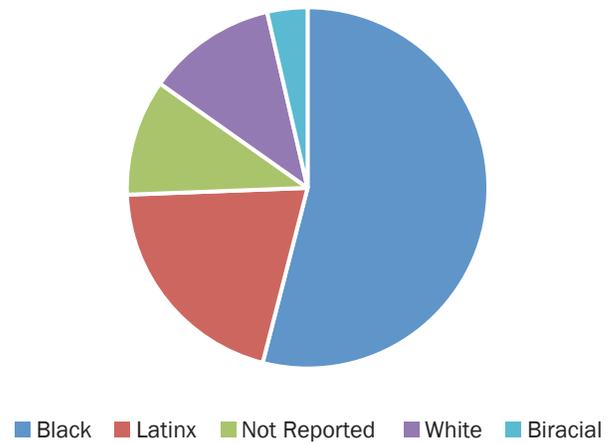
Of the 388 participants, 264 completed an optional personal information form. Of these 264, 66% were 18 or younger.

The majority of convening participants who reported their race/ethnicity were either Black or Latinx.

Age of Participants



Race/Ethnicity of Participants



Of the 264 participants completing the optional personal information form:

- ❖ 137 identified as male, 125 identified as female and 2 identified as non- binary;
- ❖ Nine indicated that they had been incarcerated at IDJJ;
- ❖ 46% indicated that either a family member or friend had had involvement in the juvenile justice system; and
- ❖ 24% reported no personal involvement with the juvenile justice system.