



# A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF YOUTH AND THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

**A 100 PERCENT  
PITTSBURGH  
PILOT PROJECT**



In March of 2015, Amachi Ambassador Tiger Weaver provided testimony in Harrisburg, PA about his experience and the impact of having an incarcerated parent to help legislators' understanding about decisions and policies that have the potential to negatively impact innocent children and their families.

Foreward from Maxwell King	3
Executive Summary	4
Background	6
Key Findings	8
Recommendations	20
Acknowledgements	26
Bibliography	27
Glossary	28

---

# FOREWARD

**THE PITTSBURGH REGION** is experiencing one of the most remarkable periods of revitalization in its history.

Across a range of indicators – from new capital investment, an influx of young professionals, expansion of service, technology and energy sectors, and general quality-of-life improvements – the region has had a dramatic recovery from the early 1980s when the bottom dropped out of its manufacturing base and tens of thousands of jobs were lost.

We at The Pittsburgh Foundation, recognizing our mission as a community philanthropy to improve life prospects for all Pittsburgh area residents, have embraced a new organizing principle, 100 Percent Pittsburgh, which celebrates the recent economic progress but also commits to providing opportunities for all residents to be full participants in the improved economy.

Our research shows that as much as a third of the region’s population lives at or near the federal poverty line. People in poverty often lack the opportunity to improve the quality of their lives. They experience a variety of social, economic and environmental stressors that prevent access to the “New Pittsburgh.” Research shows that youth, ages 12 to 24, are more vulnerable to diminished prospects from living in poverty conditions, including having a higher risk of involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Despite significant decreases since the 1990s, the United States still has the highest rate of youth confinement of any developed country in the world, with nearly 1 million youth involved in the court system per year. Last year, about 3,300 young people were funneled into the juvenile justice system in Allegheny County. At both local and national levels, youth of color are disproportionately represented in the system.

In response to these high numbers, the Foundation launched the Juvenile Justice Pilot as the first initiative of 100 Percent Pittsburgh. The goals are to support youth experiencing poverty in our region, bring regional and national attention to youth involved in the justice system and reduce the numbers of young people in the school-to-prison pipeline. Our review of our own research locally and others’ nationally make it clear that system involvement is a direct result of poverty and near-poverty conditions, as well as structural racism.

There is a wealth of data that shows the magnitude of this issue – the what. But to inform meaningful change that supports and prioritizes youth, we must fill in critically important data that has been missing from solution efforts – the why of young people landing in the justice system. The findings presented in this report reflect an unprecedented effort to elevate the voices of youth so that they can help shape the design of program and policy actions to bring needed changes to the system. This pilot project also has benefitted from the guidance of youth-serving providers and advocacy agency staffs in developing a process to respectfully interview youth about their life experiences. And as we continue with this work, we’re inviting a range of stakeholders to guide us in other aspects.

On the following pages, you will find a description of the pilot project process and detailed recommendations that will inform our grantmaking strategies going forward. From my reading of the report and follow-up discussions with staff, the most insightful material comes from the comments of the young people themselves. Unflinching in their descriptions of life against the backdrop of poverty and exposure to the juvenile justice system, they show us how high the stakes are and how dedicated we will have to be to achieve lasting social change in this area.

**Maxwell King**

President and CEO of The Pittsburgh Foundation

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the fall of 2015, the Foundation's Program and Policy Department launched the Juvenile Justice Pilot project, designed to generate data from youth who have first-hand knowledge of and/or who are at risk of experiencing the juvenile justice system in Allegheny County. Youth participants were asked to reflect on a variety of topics, such as which factors and events in their lives brought them to where they are today; and how their own voice and opinion has influenced - or not - their experience. They were also asked to share ideas for changes in the juvenile justice system to better serve young people like them. Discussion groups were planned and conducted in partnership with youth-serving organizations that have established close relationships with youth vulnerable to, or with active involvement in, the juvenile justice system.

**"I was just labeled...  
a bad kid."**

- (MALE, 16)

During the course of the eight-month pilot, five discussion groups were conducted with 53 youth, average age of 18, of which the vast majority had either current or previous experience with the juvenile justice system and had been previously suspended from school. The powerful and insightful reflections gathered reveal the importance of respectfully listening and learning from youth to understand the circumstances and factors affecting the quality of their lives. Our findings highlight the value of listening to youth and documenting the negative impact of not including their voices in critical decisions affecting their lives; their yearning for positive relationships with caring adults; the devastating impact of criminalizing their behavior.

## Allegheny County Population Profile of Youth in the Juvenile Justice System

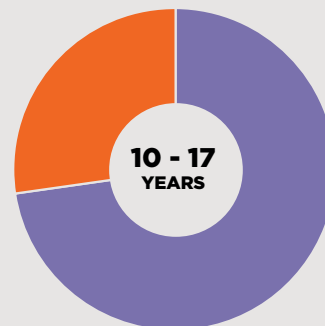
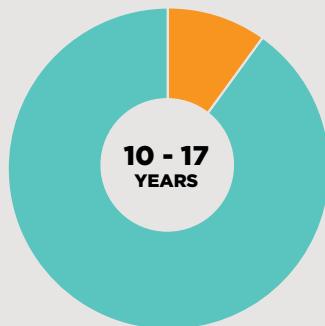


Recommendations target themes that emerged from the shared experiences of youth:

- Engage youth as advocates against system involvement by integrating their voice and vision as agents of change in their own lives, among their peers and in their communities;
- Increase system-wide awareness of race, gender and class as influences which impact their experience;
- Champion adult advocates for youth who rise above their positions to create a nurturing and supportive environment for system-involved youth;
- Connect youth to historical examples of triumph against odds and the implications of mass incarceration in the United States;
- Remove excessive burden of restitution and court-related fees, which serve to inhibit the rehabilitation and re-integration of many youth.

The stories of challenge and hope shared by these courageous youth participants remind us of the remarkable resilience they possess. Youth are only “at-risk” when they are inadequately served by the adults in systems who surround them. While the purpose of this initiative is to generate new knowledge through elevating the voices of youth who are experts on their own experience, this report reminds us that potential solutions for how to effectively support youth start with listening carefully to their voices, sharing their recommendations and committing to an agenda that puts the priorities of youth – not systems – at the center. Young people are our region’s greatest asset.

**10%**  
of children  
& youth in  
Pittsburgh  
Public Schools  
have had  
involvement  
with the  
juvenile justice  
system.



**73%**  
of referrals  
to juvenile  
probation were  
for non-violent  
crimes and  
included charges  
involving drugs,  
theft, and/or  
failing to pay  
court fines.

# THE 100 PERCENT PITTSBURGH JUVENILE JUSTICE PILOT

## State of the Juvenile Justice System in Allegheny County

In 2015, there were 3,328 referrals to the juvenile probation system in Allegheny County. The vast majority of referrals (74 percent) were young men. Of these young men, 69 percent were black, 25 percent were white and 6 percent identified as another race. In the same year, there were 2,672 youth admissions to secure detention and alternative-to-detention facilities. Referrals to juvenile probation in Allegheny County decreased 16 percent from 2014, and 40 percent since 2010. In Allegheny County, 76 percent of referrals to juvenile probation were nonviolent and included charges such as drugs, theft, and/or failure to pay court fines (OJP Annual Report, 2015; Hockenberry et al, 2013). Nationally, nearly 40 percent of detained youth have committed a technical violation of probation, drug possession or low-level property offenses. In 2013, less than 25 percent of youth in confinement in Pennsylvania had committed a violent crime, such as homicide, aggravated assault, robbery or sexual assault (Hockenberry et al, 2013).

Inequity in the rates of juvenile probation involvement for youth of color and by gender has been highlighted nationally and locally (Rovner, 2014). A simple comparison by race using national juvenile delinquency data highlights the remarkably persistent and disproportionately high rates of black youth in the juvenile justice system. The vast majority of youth in confinement pose very little risk to public safety and have not committed a violent crime. For example, in 2012 in Allegheny County, the rate of youth rate of detention for black youth was 19 times higher than for white youth, 114 per 1,000 compared to 6 per 1,000, respectively (The Burns Institute, OJJDP 2012).

## Design of Juvenile Justice Pilot

In the fall of 2015, the Foundation's Program Department launched the Juvenile Justice Pilot Project, designed to generate data from youth who are experiencing or are at risk of experiencing the juvenile justice system in Allegheny County. The following goals were identified for this pilot project:

- Expand the Foundation's knowledge regarding one of the 100 Percent Pittsburgh target populations, youth ages 12 to 24;
- Identify a series of strategies designed to ethically gather, assess and share the firsthand knowledge of the target population;

THE U.S. HAS THE HIGHEST RATE OF YOUTH  
CONFINEMENT IN THE WORLD, NEARLY **4 TIMES**

- Use these data to add to existing quantitative data;
- Collaborate with youth-service providers and advocates to inform the Foundation's understanding and identify opportunities to better serve the target population;
- Identify opportunities for systems change with members of the target population through grantmaking, convening policy and advocacy initiatives.

**“It is so easy to get into  
the juvenile system and  
so hard to get out.”**

- (FEMALE, 17)

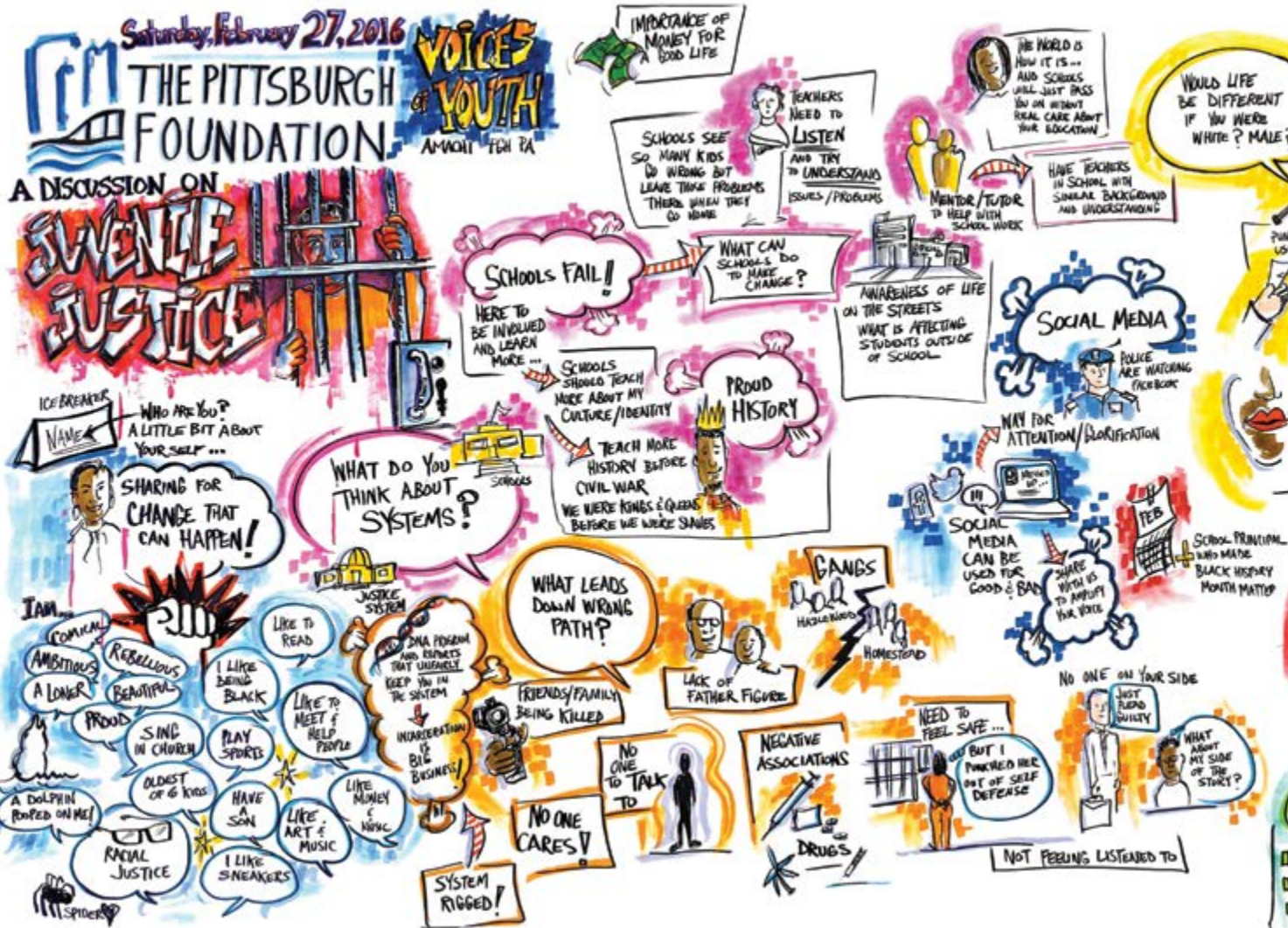
The process and findings presented here are an intentional effort to operationalize the 100 Percent Pittsburgh organizing principle's values, particularly the result of “voice.” This pilot was designed to purposefully elicit and integrate an understanding of the context and influences that impact young people in their daily lives. We also sought to amplify the often-missing voices of youth who have firsthand knowledge about the juvenile justice system to complement the existing quantitative data. This knowledge, we believed, is essential if we are to understand the reasons for disproportionate involvement of youth by race and gender and to elicit opportunities for improvement, action and meaningful systems change.

The primary advantages of this approach to engaging youth include amplifying the voices of traditional and nontraditional experts to inform systems-change priorities; integrating new, unique insights and data to existing sources to inform and prioritize prevention, intervention and policy-change opportunities in the systems that youth experience; establishing new, collaborative relationships and partnerships with and among agencies and the Foundation to design and implement effective and accountable intervention efforts; implementing novel interventions; and identifying culturally sensitive and tailored intervention opportunities to prevent youth from becoming involved with the juvenile justice system.

**HIGHER** THAN SOUTH AFRICA, THE NEXT NEXT-CLOSEST DEVELOPED COUNTRY.

“A lot of things happened that got me there, and nobody ever went back and asked me what happened and how I had got there.”

-(FEMALE, AGE 17)





# KEY FINDINGS

The following section highlights the themes that emerged from five discussions with youth. These themes represent commonalities that emerge from studying the lived experiences of youth engaged with the system. There is a great deal of overlap with the different thematic areas, indicative of the complexity of youth experiences in the system. Direct quotes from youth are highlighted in each thematic area to illustrate the ideas presented.



Graphic recording is a notetaking technique that visually captures meeting content on paper with markers and pastels. This technique was used to help facilitate and guide the participatory research process with graphic artists, Leah Silverman and Emily Marko. This graphic image of a youth discussion with the Amachi Pittsburgh Youth Ambassadors, was created by Leah Silverman.

**THEME 1:****The Importance of Listening to the Lived Experience of Youth**

Youth illustrated how the circumstances in which they live and learn are significant factors underlying the challenges they face, especially with regard to involvement in the juvenile justice system. Each session began with a group reflection and shared insights into the types of situations and experiences that youth said brought them to where they are today. Many of the youth experts reflected on the specific experiences that led to involvement with the juvenile justice system. For example:

- “My mom tried to kill me, and I had to fight to survive, and I had to fight my mom, and then I got in trouble for fighting her.”
- “Peer pressure, get caught up with the wrong people, people lead them to do stuff.”
- “A lot of parents work all the time, or are single parents. Then kids have nothing to do after school but get into trouble.”
- “Putting a kid in a placement for running away, it is not going to work well at all because that makes me feel like I am being punished for trying to save myself... and that just makes me angry. That’s why I’m being so bad.”
- “Bad environment, neighborhood, violence, crime.”
- “I ran away when I was 12. It was the situation with my family.”
- “Wrong place, wrong time.”
- “Kids don’t have a safe place to go to when they don’t have access to food or their parents can’t pay their bills. It’s embarrassing for them to ask for help. They end up trying to steal to get their own food.”
- “Kids in juvenile probation are no different.”
- “Missing school... if you are missing school, you’re not being occupied for nine hours out of the day, so that could make you do things like smoke weed or like do drugs or something like that.”
- “Kids can get in trouble for smaller things that add up, like possession of weed or missing school, and then eventually they are just looked at as criminals and end up on probation.”

Youth illustrated how the circumstances in which they live significantly determines the challenges they are facing on a daily basis. Their insights highlight the need to purposefully listen to youth in order to understand and effectively support them and help address the issues impacting their lives. Youth expressed the need for adults in the system to “go a step beyond” their specific job responsibilities to just fix the issue at hand, but to also listen, recognize and help address the social and environmental factors related to living in poverty, such as exposure to violence and trauma that are affecting their behaviors.

- “A lot of things happened that got me there, and nobody ever went back and asked me what happened and how I had got there.”
- “There needs to be somebody who sits down [and who] gets to the root of the issue before the court is getting involved. At least 90 percent of the people, there is a deeper issue that they’re doing what they’re doing...I feel like if there’s somebody who can get to the deeper issue and get to the root of that and try to help that before getting into the courts, there would be less kids getting juvenile probation and everything else.”
- “A lot of times there are issues that keep you from going to school: heat, water, your clothes are dirty and you can’t wash them.”
- “‘I believe that this is in your best interest’...What the heck. You don’t know what’s in my best interest! That’s the wrong statement. That’s the only thing in the world nobody should ever tell a person who they don’t know, [or know] their situation. They may be on probation, but they don’t know what’s going through the kid’s head...NO! It makes me feel like...a monopoly piece!”

**THEME 2:****Differences in System Experience by Race and Gender**

Youth participants believed that their experiences might have been different if they were white, although many felt that being poor and having limited resources were the most important factors. They often felt that they did not receive the benefit of the doubt and made comments demonstrating their awareness that white youth are frequently tracked into mental health services for the same behaviors for which black youth end up in the justice systems.

- “Sometimes, especially in black culture or inner-city culture, a lot of females are raised to be tough and hard and independent. So we’re coming off as angry, that’s all we know how to be, that’s what we were taught since we were born, to be this person. It means you’re out here in these streets because that’s all you know. Your parents are teaching you how to take care of your family from a very small age.”
- “[We need] just for people to pay attention more. If they keep the neighborhood how it is, there’s nobody there to catch you when you fall. ... but if you go out to Fox Chapel they got like rec centers and gyms and all this stuff and all these sports, they have that stuff, they can do that stuff; they can learn how to play sports and learn teamwork. Kids in the city don’t have that.”
- “Race... I mean... my little brother was really young when he was put on probation. Him and his friends were shooting guns up in the air. He was immediately taken in handcuffs. His friend who was white just was sent to his mom. And they were doing the same exact thing. But my brother never got out of that cycle. He was treated like an animal and forced through the [Clayton] Academy, and he graduated without even knowing how to read properly. I would say it was a black thing in his situation. No one said, ‘Let me help him figure out what’s going on, he can’t read. Maybe that’s why he’s been acting out in school, because he’s embarrassed’... So I believe it was a black thing for him.”

**Disproportionate involvement of youth of color and by gender has been highlighted nationally and locally (Rovner, 2014). Locally, black youth accounted for 20 percent of county residents ages 10 through 17, but accounted for 76 percent of the population screened at detention intake (Puzzancherra et al, 2012). Nationally, African-American girls constitute 14 percent of the general population nationally but 33.2 percent of girls detained and committed (Sickmund et al, 2015).**

### THEME 3: Physical and Sexual Abuse

A number of young women shared examples of sexual harassment and assault that they and other young women experienced in their homes, communities, schools or in programs. While not a common theme across all of the groups, young women reported being disciplined and becoming involved with the juvenile justice system for defending themselves.

- “I went to [center name], that’s basically where it all started. The teacher was messing with me on a bad day. I was on my menstrual and I had my head down and, um, and he came over and he touched me, and I don’t like the way, ‘cause he walks around with like a permanent boner, basically, [others laughing, saying ‘gross’] and I like turned around, like, whoa, I snapped, ‘Don’t touch me,’ and I jumped up and he doinked me [touching his finger to her forehead] and I punched him in the face. Like, I was already uncomfortable with you putting your hands on me!”
- “I went to this interview at [an independent living facility], and the dude’s gonna be like, ‘I can give you whatever you need – cock [said under his breath]; I swear.... I swear to God, he said it like that: ‘Cock!’ And then he was like, ‘do you drink?’ I said, ‘Yeah, sometimes,’ and he said, ‘What if you drink with somebody like me, drink you right up out of your clothes?’”<sup>1</sup>

**The rate of girls’ involvement in juvenile justice is growing disproportionately - in 2013, black girls were nearly three times as likely as their white peers to be referred to juvenile court for a delinquency offense (OJJDP, 2016; Sherman et al, 2013). Justice system-involved girls also are victimized by sexual violence at an earlier average age, and for a longer average duration, than other forms of abuse (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 1998; Schaffner, 2005; Saar et al, 2015).**

<sup>1</sup> This disclosure led to a formal Child Line Report and Investigation to the Allegheny County Department of Human Services

**THEME 4:****Criminalization of Youth Behavior in Schools and Community**

According to the youth participants, in current disciplinary practices and guidelines in schools and other youth-serving systems, adults are just waiting for kids to make a mistake, and as soon as they do, label them as delinquents.

- “Adults are just waiting for kids to mess up!”
- “I just wouldn’t lock kids up that quickly, small things shouldn’t lead to probation, or the label of probation that makes them a ‘bad kid.’ It always starts with in-school probation and then escalates from there.”
- “It is so easy to get into the juvenile system and so hard to get out.”
- “Metal detectors are assuming that you’re already a criminal. They’re just waiting to catch you... And they have a probation officer’s office for you, even though you can’t even go see your counselor to get better classes for school. But you could go to your probation officer’s office. It’s already set up for you to fail.”
- “I was just labeled... a bad kid.”

**Schools are a primary source of referrals to the juvenile justice system, and frequently refer disruptive or unruly youth to the police or to juvenile court. It is recognized that a youth’s acting out behavior is often the result or symptom of a mental health need that has gone undiagnosed or untreated (Skowrya & Coccozza, 2006). Minor school disciplinary incidents that used to be handled by school administrators and counselors are now frequently referred to law enforcement, particularly for schools in poor communities and disproportionately impacting young men and women of color (Cregor and Hewitt, 2011).**

**THEME 5:****Access to Caring and Supportive Adults and Mental Health Services**

Youth expressed needing someone to listen to them, care, understand and share important information and options about their case with them, and most of all - to believe in them. Youth shared that, rather than receiving support from adults or mental health services, medications are used to treat symptoms rather than the root causes of their behavior. Across all the sessions, youth shared that they felt that the adults in systems that serve them are overall good people trying to and just “doing their job,” but only to get them to the next step in a process and not focused on their future. They felt that adults need to “really do their job,” talk with them, “be honest,” “give them the raw truth,” and “be real, don’t sugarcoat it!”

- “[Youth need] people who will support you no matter what... people like us, we don’t get that, we don’t get that often, that’s part of the reason we are where we are.”
- “They could just be like, how are you feeling today? Is anything on your mind? Did you eat? Are you ok? I just like for people to show me that they care.”
- “I need(ed) someone to talk to, someone I could trust.”
- “Kids might get diagnosed with something that they don’t actually have and start taking medication for something, or they go on probation and become depressed. They don’t treat the depression, but they try to treat her for another mental issue.”
- “They don’t ever try to get to the why. They try medication because it’s easier than trying to dig deeper.”
- “It could start with after-school programs just asking kids if things are ok at home, or if they have enough food. And that has to be someone that they trust — not a random person. Kids don’t trust probation officers, and even though probation officers might not mean to, they pressure and threaten the kids to talk.”
- “I mean, you tell them time and time again... I didn’t know about a therapist... and I asked time again that I need someone to talk to, someone I could trust... They could have paid for that...right?”

## THEME 5:

*(continued)*

Youth experts also shared a few specific examples of adults from across the system who exemplified the type of personality, approach and relationship-centered thinking that made a difference. These include a probation officer, after-school program coordinator, a teacher, a youth support partner, and a Shuman Juvenile Detention Center staff member.

- “He [an after-school program coordinator] believed in me when I didn’t believe in me. It took that. And I eventually got it. . . . Even when he was disappointed in me, he was still there for me. And he was there when I graduated high school, so for him to not give up on me, I didn’t have that in my life. He was like, ‘Even though you messed up, we’re just gonna pick you back up and we’re gonna keep on moving,’ so that really helped me a lot.”
- “I want to say that the person that made a difference in my life was my youth support partner. She was the only one who was coming out there saying ‘Cut it out, you can do better.’ She was the one who got me to talk to my judge, to do one-on-ones with my judge. She was believing that I could do better. . . .she was the only one that had some faith in me, so once I started listening to what she was saying, that she was believing in me, that’s what made me want to start changing.”
- “My judge now, she’s nice, real nice. She took me in the back room and talked to me. To get my life story, and she was real supportive when I was pregnant and she helped me out the most. She helped me get in a foster home instead of placement [a group home]. If I wanted to meet with a family she would try that too, to see if that works, instead of just throwing me in placement or in a detention center.”

**Nearly 70 percent of youth involved with the justice system have been found to have at least one mental health condition, compared to 22 percent of youth in the general population (Teplin et al, 2003; Cocozza et al, 2006; Teplin et al, 2013). In schools and juvenile detention facilities, many of these problems go untreated or are dealt with inadequately.**



**THEME 6:****Race, Disproportionality and Institutional Neglect**

Youth participants said that youth-serving systems were not doing enough to support them. They highlighted a variety of concerns, including: classes taught in schools that lack racial sensitivity, instruction that is culturally insensitive and that promotes negative self-images for youth of color, and issues of structural racism. Youth consistently pointed to policies and practices that punish youth for circumstances and factors often beyond their control.

- “I agree, for the fact that if you think about it, all the majority of the black kids know about are the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights Movement, the Civil War, the stuff we’ve been taught in schools, they don’t go further back than that, like beyond Africa, they don’t go back to Egypt where actually our roots started...we were actually kings and queens...that needs to be brought to light.”
- I don’t like Black History Month because I just keep getting taught the same thing like about slavery, basically all these things I, like, already know...”
- “If we kill somebody, we go to jail. If cops kill somebody, they get a slap on the wrist.”
- “The system is failing youth, period! They don’t help any situation. They don’t try to. Some cases, parents aren’t even there. I’ve seen lawyers walk past these kids not even knowing who they are. And then they try to quickly get their side of the story.”

Youth participants shared that their fate depends on decisions made by their probation officers, judges, and similar adults in positions of authority, and that they are not always fair.

- “However they’re feeling that day, that’s how they’re going to prosecute. Say I’m a judge and I’m mad today because my kids got in trouble...I’m going to give them a harder sentence just because I’m mad, or less because I’m feeling grateful to be alive that day.”

Many youth do not have the money or ability to pay for restitution, and they felt that they were being asked to pay for system costs that went beyond the harm their crimes had caused.

- “Yeah, like, now I don’t have no charges or nothing...I just got restitution. I paid off half of my restitution, my baby’s dad came in to pay off the other half, and when he paid it off, my [probation officer] said, ‘Oh, we are adding \$300 more dollars for an ankle.’”

## **THEME 7: Hopes and Dreams for the Future**

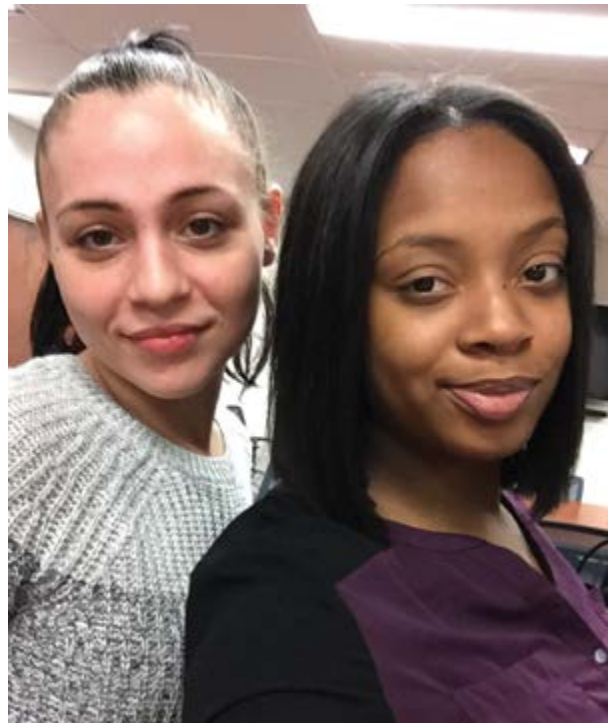
At the end of each group discussion, youth participants were invited to respond to the following question on their own, in writing: “What is a hope or dream that you have for the future?”

- Peace.
- To make a difference.
- Go back to school for social work, to become a mental health service provider to help kids in the system.
- To be a good mother, further my education and be stable for my family.
- Get my three degrees in criminal justice, support youth and benefit them from my experience.
- Be a kindergarten teacher.
- Help people in my situation.
- Be married, and a father of four.
- To be wealthy, successful.
- I wanna go to the army and be the best mother I can be. I wanna be independent so I can be on my own and be a role model for my son so he can grow up not needing nobody 'cause nobody has your back.
- Military service, serve in the Marines.
- My hopes and dreams are to just be happy – I think I deserve it.
- To be successful.
- To become a real estate (agent).
- To graduate high school/college and be successful.
- College-between Shuman Center staff and a pediatrician.
- To Live.

- Move myself/loved ones out of poverty/struggle.
- To play football.
- Move to LA, get a big house and drive fast cars.
- I want to go to college and become a biologist or a botanist or a horticulturist.
- Move everyone I love OUT.
- I wanna be a rapper, get out of da city – I want to get out and I know I can do it.
- Get my family right.
- To get out of the city, be a farmer.
- For my black people to get along.
- Be rich.
- To make it out of the Hood.
- To do drywall (construction).
- For everyone to have the same privileges as the wealthy.
- To be a staff guard at Shuman.
- That ALL systems will come together to help youth become successful.
- Open a center for teen mothers outside of the juvenile justice system.
- That there are NO kids in placement, UNLESS they request it, give kids the options.
- Own my own business.
- To be successful.

**“I need(ed) someone to talk to,  
someone I could trust.”**

- (FEMALE, 16)



Discussion group participants,  
youth support partners unit  
of the Allegheny Department  
of Human Services.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations point to opportunities for action that The Pittsburgh Foundation and other funding partners should follow to develop successful reforms in the juvenile justice system. These are guided by the input and expertise of youth and reflect the intensive discussion and review of key findings with 14 members of the Advisory Group, and 22 youth participants from the discussion groups.

**“THE MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENT OF THE VOICES INITIATIVE HAS BEEN INTEGRATING YOUTH — THE “REAL EXPERTS” — INTO EVERY STEP OF THE PROCESS. MAKING THEIR INVOLVEMENT A PRIORITY ENSURES AUTHENTICITY OF THE DATA AND THE RECOMMENDATIONS.”**

- ANNA HOLLIS, AMACHI PITTSBURGH

### RECOMMENDATION 1:

**Identify opportunities to address disproportionate system-involvement of youth of color, with a particular focus on girls of color.** Increase system-wide awareness of the interrelated dynamic of race, gender and class as influences impacting youth and girls' experience. Examine best-practice models for early intervention in schools and other systems, specifically centered around the unique strengths and needs of girls of color. Opportunities for action include:

- Encourage community partners to develop a pilot project that is centered on supporting and addressing the unique needs of girls of color.
- Explore and document best practices for school- and community-based actions that are tailored, culturally humble and developmentally appropriate for girls of color.
- Encourage officials in youth-serving organizations, juvenile probation offices and the court system to institute policies that amplify the voices and experiences of girls of color in a strengths-based approach that is guided by positive role models and women leaders of color.

### RECOMMENDATION 2:

**Support reform of school culture, curriculum and disciplinary policies.** Cultivate opportunities for systems to value and celebrate youth. Carry out a review of the current landscape of school curricula, restorative practice and justice programs. Identify those that are using best practices. Explore potential funding initiatives to strengthen and expand those programs. Focus specifically on low-resource school districts where evidence of disproportionality exists. Opportunities for action include:

- Document best practices and support community organizations that pilot school-based prevention and supports such as peer-mediation and conflict resolution that is guided by youth.
- Encourage the development of new relationships among schools, community organizations and leaders to support school-based, race-positive programming, culturally sensitive, positive-identity programs and classes that illustrate and integrate the contributions and experiences of African Americans into school curricula including history, literature, sciences, arts and music.
- Work with community organizations and schools to examine school safety and disciplinary best practices. Support and encourage youth voice and engagement in developing and implementing school discipline and action policies.

**“ACCESSING YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS WHO HAVE BEEN REMOVED FROM THEIR HOMES TO WAS A WONDERFUL COMPONENT OF THIS RESEARCH. THE RECOMMENDATIONS RING WITH**

**RECOMMENDATION 3:**

**Identify opportunities to support prevention and diversion initiatives.** Prevent adjudication and juvenile court involvement through prevention and diversion programs. Ensure that youth are receiving services in the least restrictive environment possible. Opportunities for action include:

- Support expansion of options for diversionary and juvenile court disposition to limit residential placement and promote community-based alternatives such as the community-intensive supervision program, which is currently only available in Allegheny County to young men.
- Support community organizations that want to adopt best practices. Support pilot interventions guided by the interest of each young person that overcome existing family engagement, transportation and access barriers.

**RECOMMENDATION 4:**

**Identify opportunities to increase access to caring adults and mental health services.**

Cultivate and champion adult advocates for youth who rise above their positions to create a nurturing and supportive environment for system-involved youth. Prioritize supports for young people in schools before they reach the juvenile justice system, and expand access to mental health support services within the juvenile justice system. Provide targeted system-wide training in mental health first aid, trauma awareness, and skills for adults who work with youth. Opportunities for action include:

- Encourage mental health service providers to work with educators to address the stigma of mental health in many communities by cultivating a therapeutic environment.
- Leverage partnerships to explore funding opportunities that support trauma informed training across the system(s) that affect young people.
- Cultivate partnerships and identify opportunities with key stakeholders to advocate at the state level for policies that support more mental health workers and placement in schools, in juvenile justice and other community settings.

**HEAR FIRSTHAND WHAT INTERVENTIONS WOULD HAVE HELPED  
AN AUTHENTIC VOICE INFORMED BY MANY HOURS OF LISTENING.”**

- JUDGE KATHRYN HENS-GRECO,  
FAMILY DIVISION, ALLEGHENY  
COUNTY COURT OF COMMON PLEAS

### RECOMMENDATION 5:

**Engage youth as advocates against system involvement by integrating their voices as agents of change, among their peers and in their communities.** Support programs and strategies that ensure the integration of youth voice in the process of making decisions that impact their lives. Opportunities for action include:

- Acknowledge the therapeutic value of integrating youth voices in all phases of their process, and support collaborations in program development, assessment and system-reform priorities that center on the value and power of youth voice.
- Support initiatives and planning efforts that ensure youth provide their perspective and feedback directly to the courts related to the effectiveness, engagement and staff/services being received by agencies appointed by the court (for example, drug and alcohol providers, mental health providers).
- Support efforts to engage and integrate youth participants on advisory boards (with stipend) to inform prevention and system-based interventions.

### RECOMMENDATION 6:

**Support efforts to reform the system of Restitution and court-related fees.** Examine, redefine and limit court-related fines and fees. Youth in the juvenile justice system often end up there as a result of the risks, influences, exposures and limitations they experience as a result of living in poverty. Flexibility within the juvenile justice system and courts allows for discretion when it comes to requiring court-related fines and fees. Opportunities for action include:

- At the state level, examine and reform policies based on evidence-based models and/or best practices (locally and nationally) to reflect more reasonable amounts, limit timely restitution to under one year, and establish other opportunities for restitution and community service that is meaningful, restorative and focuses on skills-building.
- Create space for training and development of common standards and models for restitution and fines/fees. Create opportunities to move restitution from “punishment” to a “learning experience.”

I AM THOUGHTFUL ABOUT ALL OF THE COUNSEL GARNERED FROM THE ADVISORY MADE ENCOURAGE US TO LOOK INTO SOCIETY AS A WHOLE AND WHERE WE I AM ESPECIALLY INTERESTED IN THE SUGGESTION TO FOCUS ON GIRLS OF COLOR. OVER-POLICED AND SUSPENDED AT A RATE MUCH HIGHER THAN THEIR



**RECOMMENDATION 7:**

**Explore and provide support for interdisciplinary training opportunities** for youth, families and adults working within multiple spaces in schools, community and juvenile justice systems to promote developmentally appropriate, race-positive, gender-specific and tailored practices that are trauma-informed. Opportunities for action include:

- Explore and support a pilot training initiative that examines the local and national data and translates legal rights information for youth, families and communities to assist with navigation of the school and juvenile justice systems.
- Provide training for providers and advocates in the process of listening to youth and recognizing the importance and power of the relationship building that takes time. Promote models that support non-linear and creative approaches for engaging youth.

**RECOMMENDATION 8:**

**Support initiatives that combine data with youth expertise to identify and address disparities.** Integrate and utilize multiple data sources to identify key decision points in the system to determine those that create disparities. Disaggregate data by descriptors such as race, ethnicity and offense to identify where disparities exist to inform strategies to address them. Publicly report findings and progress in efforts to reduce disparities on an annual basis. Opportunities for action include:

- Pilot an initiative with existing data partners to create a venue with youth to be engaged with existing data, to help identify and examine opportunities for intervention, identify key transition points for addressing disproportionate system involvement in schools and the juvenile justice system.
- Support agencies, artists and theater partners to work with youth to help communicate the data to a broader audience.

**BOARD AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS. THE POINTS CAN DO BETTER BY THOSE WHO ENTRUST US TO PROVIDE SAFE SPACES. STATISTICS SHOW THAT YOUNG BLACK GIRLS ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY COUNTERPARTS OF OTHER RACES AND GENDER IDENTITIES.** - CELESTE SMITH, 1HOOD MEDIA

# PILOT PROJECT LEADERSHIP AND PARTNERS:

This report has been developed through a collective effort, facilitated by The Pittsburgh Foundation and guided by 22 regional youth policy makers, youth-service providers and juvenile justice and probation staff. The process, management and research for this pilot has been led by Michael Yonas, senior program officer for Research and Special Initiatives, with assistance and facilitation from Amber Knight of the Allegheny County Department of Human Services Youth Support Partner Unit, Michelle McMurray, senior program officer for Health and Human Services, Germaine Williams, senior program officer for Arts and Culture and Jeanne Pearlman, senior vice president for Program and Policy. Sara Goodkind, associate professor of Social Work from the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work assisted with data analysis, interpretation and recommendations.

The following local experts were instrumental in informing, developing and guiding this project, and continue to provide direction. We sincerely thank all of them for their ongoing partnership in this important effort:

- **Kimberly Booth, assistant chief probation officer for the Allegheny County Juvenile Court\***
- Sharon Broker, child advocacy specialist, Kids Voice
- James Brown, director of youth development, Homewood-Brushton YMCA, Lighthouse
- **Kathi Elliot, executive director, Gwen's Girls\***
- Jessica Gumbert, program coordinator, Braddock Youth Project
- Rev. Glenn G. Grayson, executive director, and Derric Heck, Center that CARES
- Hon. Kathryn Hens-Greco, Family Division of Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas
- **Anna Hollis, executive director, and Kayla Bowyer, ambassadors' coordinator, Amachi Pittsburgh\***
- Nancy Huble, Pittsburgh director, Education Law Center
- Shalawn James, program coordinator Mental Health America-Pennsylvania.
- Pamela Little-Poole, A+ Schools
- Danielle Morrison, program director, Court Appointed Special Advocates
- Edward P. Mulvey, professor of Psychiatry, University of Pittsburgh
- Raymond Robinson, Social Services Division, Shuman Juvenile Detention Center of Allegheny County
- Tiffany Sizemore-Thompson, clinical professor, Juvenile Defender Clinic, Education Law Clinic, Duquesne University School of Law
- Celeste Smith, chief executive officer, and Jasiri X, creative director, 1Hood Media
- **Amber Knight, Aaron Thomas, Amanda Hirsh, Youth Support Partners Unit, Allegheny County Department of Human Services\***
- **Stephanie Walsh, chief operating officer, Auberle-Diversion Program and Jennifer Lewis, coach manager, 412 Youth Zone\***

**\*Partner in youth engagement and data collection**

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allegheny County Juvenile Probation Report (2015). Accessed online October 23, 2016. <https://www.alleghenycourts.us/downloads/Family/juvenile%20section/Annual%20Reports/2015.pdf>.
- The Burns Institute for Juvenile Justice Fairness and Equity. Unbalanced Juvenile Justice (2012). Accessed online November 27, 2016 at <http://data.burnsinstitute.org>.
- Chesney-Lind, M., & Shelden, R. G. (1998) *Girls, Delinquency, and Juvenile Justice*. Belmont, CA: West-Wadsworth.
- Cregor M., Hewitt D. (2011) Dismantling the School to Prison Pipeline: A Survey from the Field. Poverty and Race. Vol 20 (1). [http://www.naacpldf.org/files/case\\_issue/PRRAC%20journal%20Jan\\_Feb%202011-%20Dismantling\\_the\\_School-to-Prison\\_Pipeline.pdf](http://www.naacpldf.org/files/case_issue/PRRAC%20journal%20Jan_Feb%202011-%20Dismantling_the_School-to-Prison_Pipeline.pdf).
- Hockenberry, Sarah, and Puzanchera, Charles. 2015. Juvenile Court Statistics 2013. Pittsburgh, PA: National Center for Juvenile Justice.
- Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). (2016) Glossary of Terms. Accessed online October 16, 2016 at <https://www.ojjdp.gov/grantees/pm/glossary.html>.
- Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). (2016) Girls and the Juvenile Justice System. Accessed online, November 1, 2016 at <https://www.ojjdp.gov/policyguidance/girls-juvenile-justice-system/>.
- Puzanchera, Charles, Knoll, Crystal, Adams, Benjamin, and Sickmund, Melissa. 2012. Allegheny County Detention Screening Study. Pittsburgh, PA: National Center for Juvenile Justice.
- Rovner, Joshua, The Sentencing Project (2014). *Disproportionate Minority Contact in the Juvenile Justice System*, 1-2, available at [http://sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/jj\\_Disproportionate%20Minority%20Contact.pdf](http://sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/jj_Disproportionate%20Minority%20Contact.pdf).
- Saar M., Epstein R., Rosenthl L., Vafa Y. (2015). The Sexual Assault to Prison Pipeline: The Girl's Story. Accessed online, October 25, 2016, at [http://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/r4g/2015/02/2015\\_COP\\_sexual-abuse\\_layout\\_web-1.pdf](http://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/r4g/2015/02/2015_COP_sexual-abuse_layout_web-1.pdf).
- Schaffner, Laurie. 2005. "Research Brief: Violence Against Girls Provokes Girls' Violence," Justice Policy Journal, 2(2) Fall:1-15. (Available online at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/255571805\\_Violence\\_Against\\_Girls\\_Provokes\\_Girls%27\\_Violence](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/255571805_Violence_Against_Girls_Provokes_Girls%27_Violence)).
- Sickmund, M., Sladky, A., Kang, W., Puzanchera, C. US Dep't of Justice, Nat'l Ctr. for Juv. Justice, Easy Access to the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement: 1997-2013, <http://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezacjrp>.
- Skowyra, K. & Cocozza, J. (2006). A Blueprint for Change: Improving the System Response to Youth with Mental Health Needs Involved with the Juvenile Justice System. Delmar, NY: National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice. Available at [http://www.ncmhjj.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/2006\\_A-Blueprint-for-Change.pdf](http://www.ncmhjj.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/2006_A-Blueprint-for-Change.pdf).

## GLOSSARY

**Adjudication** - Adjudication is the court process that determines if the juvenile committed the act for which he or she is charged. The term "adjudicated" is analogous to "convicted" and indicates that the court concluded the juvenile committed the act.

**Delinquent act** - An act committed by a juvenile for which an adult could be prosecuted in a criminal court, but when committed by a juvenile is within the jurisdiction of the juvenile court. Delinquent acts include crimes against persons, crimes against property, drug offenses and crimes against public order, when juveniles commit such acts.

**Drug abuse violations** - State and/or local offenses relating to the unlawful possession, sale, use, growing and manufacturing of narcotic drugs.

**Intake decision** - The decision made by juvenile court intake that results in a case either being handled informally at the intake level or being petitioned and scheduled for an adjudicatory or waiver hearing.

**Judicial decision** - The decision made in response to a petition that asks the court to adjudicate or waive the youth. This decision is generally made by a juvenile court judge or referee.

**Juvenile** - A youth at or below the upper age of juvenile court jurisdiction in a particular. In Pennsylvania it is under age 18 unless a court decides otherwise, and then only to age 21.

**Juvenile court** - Any court that has jurisdiction over matters involving juveniles.

**Mental health disorder**: Any clinically significant behavioral or psychological syndrome characterized by the presence of distressing symptoms, impairment of functioning, or significantly increased risk of death, pain, disability or loss of freedom.

**Petition** - A document filed in juvenile court alleging that a juvenile is a delinquent and asking that the court assume jurisdiction over the juvenile or asking that an alleged delinquent be waived to criminal court for prosecution as an adult.

**Placement status** - Identifies categories of juveniles held in residential placement facilities:

- **Committed** - Includes juveniles in placement in the facility as part of a court ordered disposition.
- **Detained** - Includes juveniles held prior to adjudication while awaiting an adjudication hearing in juvenile court, as well as juveniles held after adjudication while awaiting disposition or awaiting placement elsewhere.
- **Diversion** - Includes juveniles sent to the facility in lieu of adjudication as part of a diversion agreement.

**Prevention:** Programs, research or other initiatives to prevent or reduce the incidence of delinquent acts and directed to youth at risk of becoming delinquent to prevent them from entering the juvenile justice system or to intervene with first-time and nonserious offenders to keep them out of the juvenile justice system.

**Restitution:** In its traditional sense, restitution has been defined as "a monetary payment by the offender to the victim for the harm reasonably resulting from the offense."

**Status offense** - A non-delinquent/noncriminal offense; an offense that is illegal for underage persons, but not for adults:

- **Curfew violation** - Violation of an ordinance forbidding persons below a certain age from being in public places during set hours.
- **Incorrigible, ungovernable** - Being beyond the control of parents, guardians, or custodians.
- **Running away** - Leaving the custody and home of parents or guardians without permission and failing to return within a reasonable length of time.
- **Truancy** - Violation of a compulsory school attendance law.
- **Underage drinking** - Possession, use, or consumption of alcohol by a minor.

## ABOUT THE PITTSBURGH FOUNDATION

Established in 1945, The Pittsburgh Foundation is one of the nation's oldest community foundations and is the 13th largest of more than 750 community foundations across the United States.

The Foundation's resources comprise endowment funds established by individuals, businesses and organizations with a passion for charitable giving and a deep commitment to the Pittsburgh community. The Foundation currently has more than 2,000 individual donor funds and, together with its supporting organizations, assets of more than \$1.14 billion. Grantmaking benefits a broad spectrum of community life within Pittsburgh and beyond.

The Foundation has strengthened its focus on community, the positive impact that can be achieved through grantmaking, the engagement of donors in critical regional issues, and the convening of leadership in collaboration with funding and civic partners.



Five PPG Place  
Suite 250  
Pittsburgh, PA 15222  
[www.pittsburghfoundation.org](http://www.pittsburghfoundation.org)