

# ON THE LINE



Insight from Youth Justice Visioning Sessions Across Texas

March 2019



TEXAS CRIMINAL  
JUSTICE COALITION

The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition is deeply appreciative of everyone who attended our youth justice visioning sessions and shared their lived experiences with us. We thank Youth Rise Texas and their youth leaders for partnering with us for the Austin visioning session. We thank Texas Folklife for recording and converting to podcast the Austin visioning session. Finally, we thank Deanna Luprete and Epicenter for their invaluable efforts in helping coordinate the visioning sessions.

The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition advances solutions and builds coalitions to reduce mass incarceration and foster safer Texas communities.

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# ON THE LINE

## **Insight from Youth Justice Visioning Sessions Across Texas**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Texas is in the midst of a youth justice system transformation. After years of turmoil, the Texas Juvenile Justice Department is in the process of implementing short- and long-term reform goals aimed at creating a model system that is more efficient, effective, and trauma-informed. The agency's plans include a \$37 million legislative appropriations request, which would allow for additional trauma-informed training, family reentry specialists, and alternative placements to decrease populations in the agency's five secure facilities.

Yet, if true youth justice transformation is to take hold and be successful in Texas, the voices of Texas residents—particularly those most affected by youth incarceration—must be part of the reform conversation.

From July through October 2018, the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition held a series of community visioning sessions across Texas to answer this question: What do young people need to avoid justice system involvement and lead successful lives?

During each visioning session, participants offered insight, often the product of lived experience as a system-impacted youth or as the parent of a system-impacted youth. Each attendee was also asked to identify the top three things they would change about the juvenile justice system in Texas. While the top issues raised by attendees varied slightly from session to session, feedback from all four sessions was combined to identify a collective theme of priorities.

## Top Priorities Identified by Attendees of the Youth Justice Visioning Sessions

1. Raise the age of juvenile jurisdiction
2. Build a more rehabilitative youth justice system
3. Reform harsh sentencing for youth
4. Close youth prisons
5. Invest in alternatives to justice system involvement
6. Provide more counseling/mentorship/peer support for youth
7. Provide more support for families

These themes should help illuminate the particular challenges facing residents in different communities throughout the state and provide a roadmap for transformational reform based on their vision for a brighter future.

## QUICK FACTS

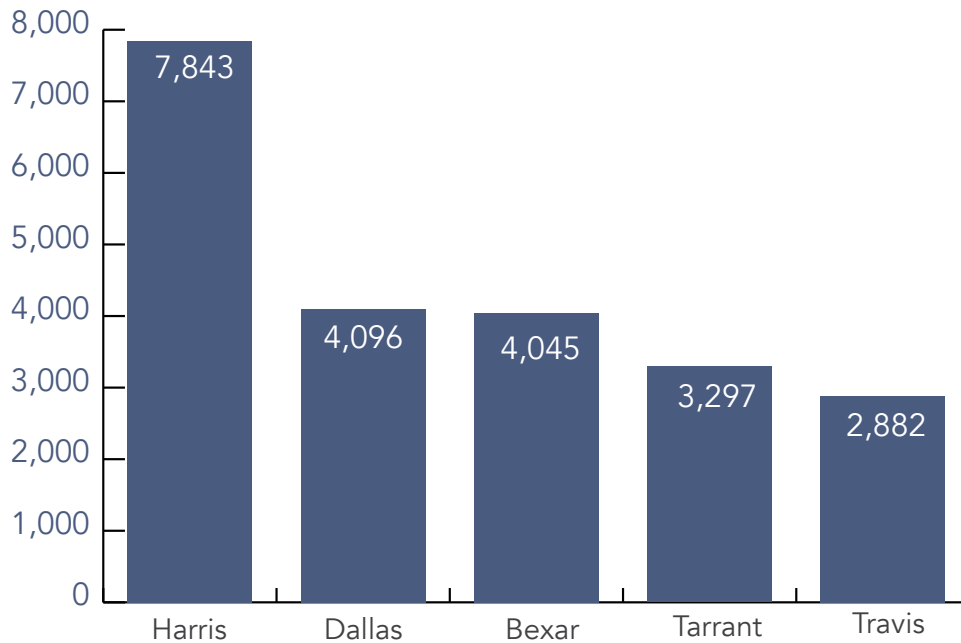
- Approximately **55,000** kids aged 10 through 16 are referred to Texas juvenile probation departments each year, the first point of contact in the juvenile justice system.
- Of those, less than **1,000** kids are committed to the Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) which operates 5 state secure facilities.
- Approximately **40,000** kids are placed on probation, receive deferred adjudication, or receive supervisory caution each year.
- About **150** kids are certified to the adult system each year.
- Approximately **20,000** 17-year-olds are arrested and immediately processed through the adult system in Texas each year, given that Texas' age of automatic adult criminal jurisdiction remains 17.

# DEMOGRAPHICS ACROSS ALL VISIONING SESSIONS

The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition hosted youth justice visioning sessions in four Texas cities in 2018: Houston (Harris County), Arlington (representing Dallas and Tarrant Counties), San Antonio (Bexar County), and Austin (Travis County).

We chose these areas because they send the greatest number of kids into the system.

## Total Referrals to Juvenile Probation in 2016, Top 5 Counties

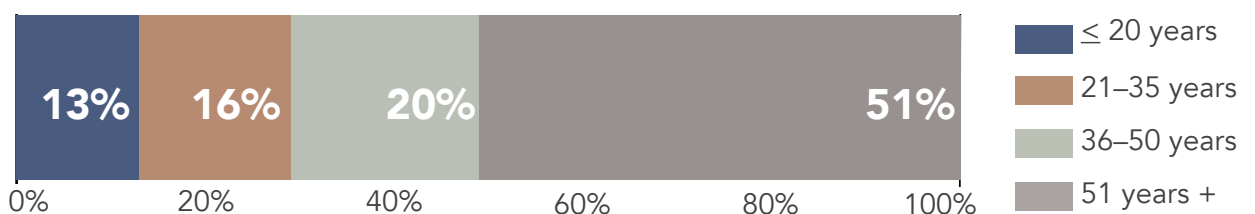


Approximately 100 people attended our visioning sessions. During each session, attendees were asked to complete an evaluation form. These evaluations provided the following insight on attendee demographics.

## Age

Approximately 13 percent of attendees across visioning sessions were 20 years of age or younger. Sixteen percent were between the ages of 21 and 35. Twenty percent were between the ages of 36 and 50. The largest percentage of attendees, 51 percent, was 51 years old or older.

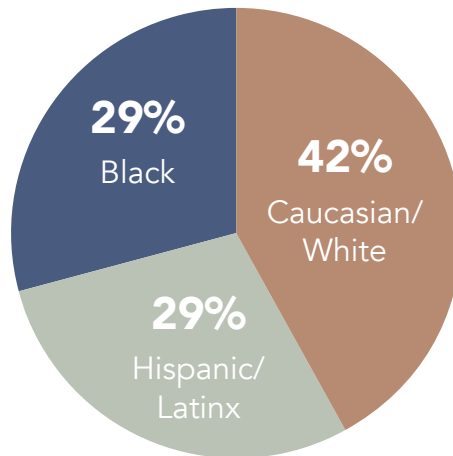
## Age Demographics at Youth Justice Visioning Sessions Across Texas



## Race/Ethnicity

Approximately 42 percent of attendees were Caucasian/white. Twenty-nine percent were Hispanic/Latinx. Twenty-nine percent were Black.

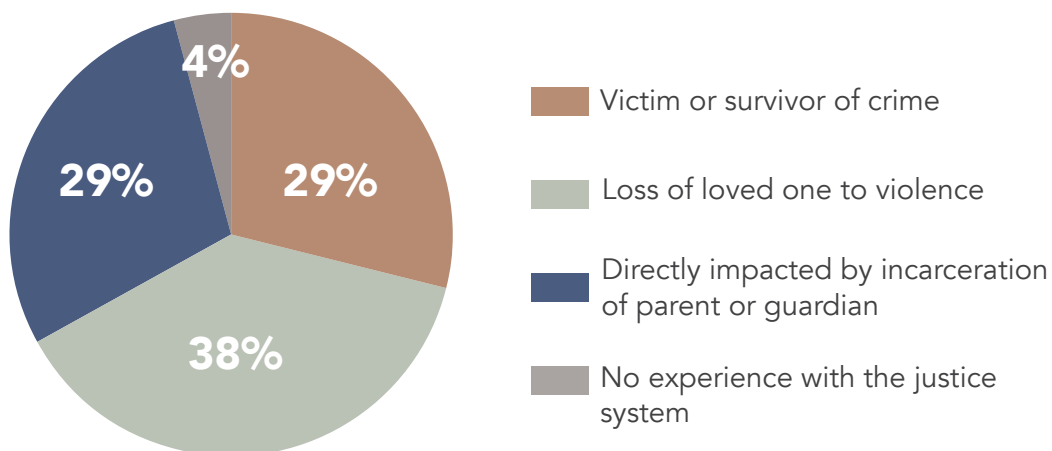
### Race/Ethnicity Demographics for Youth Justice Visioning Sessions in Texas



## Personal Experience with the Justice System

The vast majority — 80 percent — of attendees reported that they or a loved one had direct experience with the juvenile or criminal justice system. Twenty-nine percent identified as a victim or survivor of crime. Thirty-eight percent reported having lost a loved one to violence. Twenty-nine percent reported having been directly impacted by the incarceration of a parent or guardian.

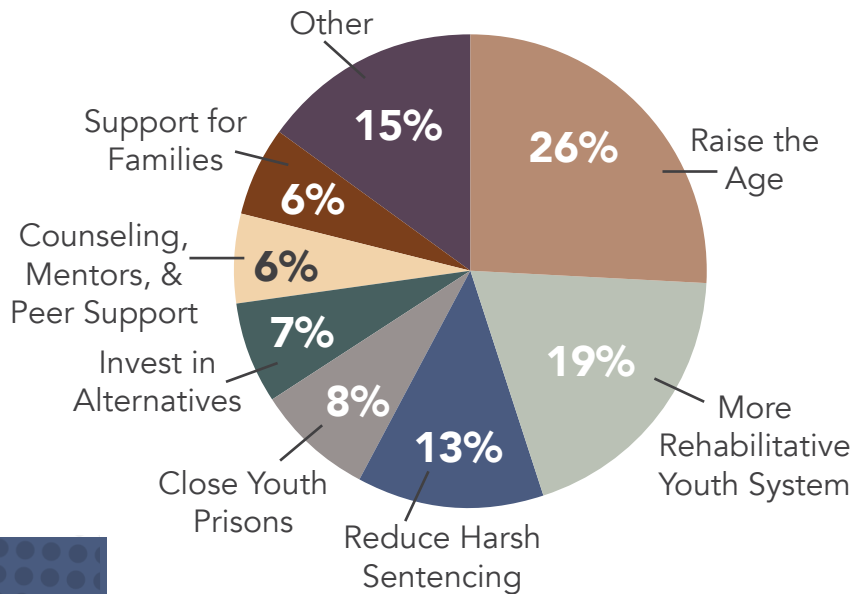
### Participants' Experience with the Justice System



# TOP ISSUES ACROSS ALL VISIONING SESSIONS

Each attendee was asked to identify the top three things they would change about the juvenile justice system in Texas. The attendees were not provided with a list of issues; the question was completely open-ended. While the top issues raised by attendees varied slightly from session to session, feedback from all four sessions was combined to create a ranking of seven priority issues.

## Issue Prioritization for Youth Justice Visioning Sessions in Texas



“The age when we start treating people as adults should be evidence-based. Brain science and human development should inform the age of criminal responsibility, not just randomly deciding it is going to be 17 year old.”

Participant at the Houston visioning session

The following provides more information and proposed solutions to address each of the seven priority issues. The additional 15 percent of total votes that comprise the “Other” category were cast for the following: more positive reinforcements for kids, more training for those who come into regular contact with kids, independent oversight of the Youthful Offender Program (which houses kids in a Texas adult prison), shorter probation terms, the removal of full-time police officers from schools, greater investments in mental health services, strategies to address racial disparities in the system, and more job training/educational supports.

### Raise the Age of Juvenile Jurisdiction

Attendees at all four visioning sessions chose this as the number one issue they would like to change. Across sessions, 25 percent of total votes were cast for raising the age.



In Texas, 17-year-olds who are arrested are automatically sent to the adult justice system. Texas is one of only four states left to treat these teens as adults for criminal justice purposes<sup>1</sup>— removing their parents from the court process, and exposing kids to confinement in adult jails.

Of the 20,000 17-year-olds arrested in Texas in 2017, more than 95 percent were arrested for nonviolent and misdemeanor offenses.<sup>2</sup> These kids could be processed through the juvenile system, where they would have more access to community-based rehabilitative services (e.g., counseling, education, and treatment), giving them positive and age-appropriate redirection. This is a common-sense approach, as kids are highly amenable to rehabilitation. Furthermore, keeping kids in the juvenile (vs. adult) system lowers their likelihood of re-offending by 34 percent,<sup>3</sup> and it prevents them from receiving an adult criminal record, which can create barriers to a college education, employment, housing, and joining the military.

It should be noted that only 33 kids aged 17 or younger were actually incarcerated in a Texas prison or state jail as of August 2017<sup>4</sup>—a small population that, again, could be absorbed by the juvenile system, especially given that the incarcerated juvenile population declined from 1,026 in December 2017 to 879 in June 2018 under the leadership of Executive Director Camille Cain.<sup>5</sup>

**Proposed Solution:** Texas should raise the automatic age of criminal jurisdiction from 17 to 18, which will start kids off in the juvenile system but give judges the discretion to transfer kids with the most serious offenses to the adult system on a case-by-case basis.

“How can we create a system that really speaks to the reality of cognitive brain science? Yes, it will be hard, but we have to undo all of the wrong we have already done. If we are going to put money into something, let’s put money into fixing our mistakes and not kicking the can down the road.”

Participant at the Houston visioning session

## 86 percent of GOP primary voters favor starting 17-year-olds in the juvenile justice system, while giving a judge the discretion to move them to the adult system on a case-by-case basis.

December 2016 poll conducted by Baseline & Associates, Inc.

“I need a signed permission slip to go on a school field trip, but at the same time you can send me to an adult prison? It doesn’t make sense.”

Participant at the Austin visioning session

“You cannot make a child an adult just because you’re mad at them. A child is a child.”

Participant at the San Antonio visioning session

## Build a More Rehabilitative Youth Justice System

*Across all visioning sessions, 19 percent of total votes were cast for a more rehabilitative and therapeutic youth justice system.*

“I think more funding from the juvenile justice system needs to go into rehabilitative services on their campus, more than just punitive [strategies].”

Participant at the Houston visioning session

In 2006, media and governmental scrutiny uncovered rampant sexual and physical abuse in Texas’ juvenile corrections facilities, leading to a federal investigation and omnibus legislation in 2007 that removed all kids with misdemeanors from state secure confinement. Over the course of subsequent legislative sessions, the state has begun to redirect funding toward localized rehabilitation programs. Ultimately, seven state secure facilities have closed and the number of kids incarcerated in the five remaining facilities has dropped from 5,000 to under 1,000 today.

Despite this progress, allegations of abuse, neglect, and staffing shortages in juvenile facilities resurfaced in late 2017 and persist today.<sup>6</sup> Also problematic, nearly all of the 800 or so kids detained in Texas’ state secure juvenile facilities have specialized needs, including mental health and substance use disorders and 65 percent have a history of abuse, neglect, or

family violence.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the number of youth in Texas’ state secure juvenile facilities with significant mental health needs more than doubled from 2014 to 2018, increasing from 21 percent to 44 percent.<sup>8</sup>

**Proposed Solution:** Texas Juvenile Justice Department facilities should implement trauma-informed care across programs, emphasize treatment over punishment, maintain strong monitoring of conditions and allegations of abuse or neglect, improve opportunities for family interaction, and implement earlier after-care and reentry strategies to help kids successfully transition back into Texas communities.

## Reform Harsh Sentencing of Youth

*Across all visioning sessions, 13 percent of total votes cast were for reforming harsh sentencing of youth, including no longer certifying kids as adults and no longer sentencing kids to extreme sentences without meaningful opportunities for parole.*

Kids are routinely sent to Texas adult prisons either because they (1) were 17 years old when they committed an offense and therefore adults under Texas law, (2) were certified to stand trial as adults, or (3) are completing their determinate sentences after aging out of the juvenile justice system.

**“It used to be that, if you got into a fight on the school yard, they’d just call your parents. Now, there’s police officers in schools, so you get arrested and end up with a felony. It’s fueling the school-to-prison pipeline.”**

Participant at the San Antonio visioning session

However, tremendous growth and maturity often occur in one's late teens through mid-20s.<sup>9</sup> Research has shown that certain areas of the brain, particularly those that affect judgment and decision-making, do not fully develop until the early 20's. The U.S. Supreme Court stated in its 2005 *Roper v. Simmons* decision, "[t]he reality that juveniles still struggle to define their identity means it is less supportable to conclude that even a heinous crime committed by a juvenile is evidence of irretrievably depraved character."<sup>10</sup>

The fact that young adults are still developing means they are uniquely situated for personal growth and rehabilitation. Again, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed with this sentiment, ruling that mandatory life without parole sentences for people under the age of 18 are unconstitutional, and requiring courts to consider the youthfulness of defendants facing that sentence.<sup>11</sup> That decision, coupled with the *Roper* decision, recognizes that it is wrong to deny someone who commits a crime under the age of 18 the opportunity to demonstrate rehabilitation.

Sadly, Texas sentencing laws ignore scientific evidence on adolescent development and neuroscience, and the state's current parole system provides no viable mechanism for reviewing a case after a young person has grown up and matured. Texas law should motivate young people to focus on rehabilitation and provide a path to redemption for those who can prove they merit a second chance.

**Proposed Solution:** In addition to raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction to include 17-year-olds, Texas should explore opportunities to end the practice of certifying juveniles to stand trial as adults, and it should narrow the use of determinate sentencing, instead allowing kids to stay in the juvenile justice system rather than transferring them to the adult system after a set time period.

Texas should also consider joining with other states that provide a "second look" at the sentences of individuals who were convicted of crimes committed prior to their 18th birthday. Texas should provide an earlier parole consideration focused on the extent to which the person has demonstrated that he or she has successfully rehabilitated and matured. Safe release decisions will not only save taxpayer dollars spent on needless incarceration, they will advance Texas' goals for strong families and communities.

## 75 percent of GOP primary voters favor providing a path to redemption

for people given a life sentence for a crime committed under the age of 18 and allowing a second look for parole for those who can prove they merit a second chance.

March 2018 poll conducted by Baseline & Associates, Inc.

## Close Youth Prisons

Across all visioning sessions, 8 percent of total votes were cast for closing youth prisons and shrinking the size of the juvenile justice system.

As discussed above, allegations of abuse, neglect, and staffing shortages in state juvenile facilities resurfaced in 2017 and persist today,<sup>12</sup> and nearly all of the 800 or so kids detained in Texas' state secure juvenile facilities have specialized needs, including mental health and substance use disorders.<sup>13</sup> In September 2018, the Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD) put forth a reform proposal that would focus the agency's attention and resources on keeping kids in the shallowest end of the system possible, with the goal of shrinking facilities to enable better care and more family engagement.<sup>14</sup>

**Proposed Solution:** Texas should continue juvenile system regionalization by expanding funding for smaller, local therapeutic facilities and community-based programming, where kids' underlying needs (including mental health, substance use, trauma, and behavioral issues) can be addressed in the least restrictive setting—and closer to home. This will safely reduce the population incarcerated in TJJD, setting more kids down a path to success, lowering staff-to-youth ratios in state secure facilities, and freeing up resources for kids with higher-level needs.

**71 percent of GOP primary voters favor keeping 13 through 17-year-olds convicted of crimes in smaller, group homes closer to their usual places of residence.**

March 2018 poll conducted by Baseline & Associates, Inc.

“We have such a large budget for cops. But there isn't money for counselors?”

Participant at the Houston visioning session

## Invest in Alternatives to Justice System Involvement

Across all visioning sessions, 7 percent of total votes were cast for investing in diversion and alternatives to incarceration.

Diversion programs provide a safe, proven opportunity to address underlying trauma and behavioral issues through

**“People who have experience in the criminal justice system often don't identify as victims because of stigma. So many people who have been incarcerated have also been victimized, but they aren't eligible for crime victims' services because of their conviction.”**

Participant at the Arlington visioning session

specialized programming rather than through incarceration.

For example, restorative justice programs provide an alternative to youth incarceration, wherein those harmed and those who have inflicted harm can share their perspectives, voice what they consider to be “justice” in their unique situation, and work together toward a resolution.<sup>15</sup> Restorative justice strategies for kids have shown to be more efficient and more cost-effective than placing a child in the juvenile justice system.<sup>16</sup>

Another way to invest in prevention and diversion is by supporting trauma recovery centers, developed at the University of California, San Francisco, and now extending across the country: “This breakthrough and evidence-based model is helping the hardest-to-reach survivors of violent crime heal and recover from the effects of trauma.”<sup>17</sup> This is especially important given that, as of January 2019, 65 percent of kids committed to TJJD have a history of abuse, neglect, or family violence, and 65 percent have an incarcerated family member.<sup>18</sup>

The Lone Star Justice Alliance, which seeks to redirect youth and emerging adults out of the criminal justice system and into community supports and services, recently launched an innovative public health alternative-to-incarceration program for justice system-involved emerging adults, ages 17–24, who are charged with a felony offense in the adult system in Williamson and Dallas Counties. In lieu of traditional court adjudication, participants receive community-based services through a localized, integrated health and social services program that is structured to reduce participants’ risk of criminal behavior while simultaneously addressing adverse social determinants of health (e.g., poverty, housing insecurity, unemployment). Among the program’s core components are immediate access to defense counsel, as well as intensive case management services provided by licensed clinical social workers and peer support specialists. Participants who successfully meet the goals identified in their individual care plan will graduate from the program and be eligible to have the record of their arrest expunged.

The Irving Police Department’s Youth Investigations Division utilizes the “Family Solutions Program” from Families4Change (F4C), a nonprofit organization that seeks to reduce juvenile offenses, problem behavior, and truancy; F4C provides a diversion curriculum to various counties and school districts throughout the country. Their program provides an alternative to probation and/or school suspension for kids through strengths-based intervention and group social support. The multiple-family group model allows families to work together in structured activities and facilitated discussions and leads to a sense of community. The program is offered at no cost to families, compared to typical court costs of \$1,000 or more, and it’s offered in both English and Spanish. Its ultimate aims are to build family support, and to help kids develop communication skills and strategies for effective decision-making and conflict resolution. Before the end of the program, the kids complete a community

“You know, victims of crime often become perpetrators of crime. Real grief counseling is necessary for crime victims. What if there were more services for those people? We have victims services, but it is highly condensed to the most egregious offenses that are prosecuted through the criminal justice system. But that is not the vast majority of victimization that happens. We need expansion of those programs.”

Participant at the Houston visioning session

66 A lot of times schools don't offer resources until your child has actually failed or is getting into trouble. And then there is always the issue of availability of healthcare providers—because my son can see a psychologist but in order to get his medication he has to see a psychiatrist. They are more expensive and there aren't many of them in Texas. The wait is 8 months to see a psychiatrist.<sup>99</sup>

Participant at the Houston visioning session

service project together—they visit a local nursing home and play Bingo with the residents! Upon successful completion of the program, the Police Department destroys all information relating to the child and no charges are ever filed, giving the kids a true fresh start.

Proposed Solution: As the size of the juvenile justice system in Texas continues to shrink, Texas should divert funding away from that system and into diversion programs and alternatives to incarceration that put kids on a healthy, safe, and stable path.

### **Provide More Counseling, Mentorship, and Peer Support for Youth**

*In every visioning session, participants raised concerns about the lack of counselors, mentors, and peer support for kids. Across all sessions, 6 percent of total votes were cast for providing more funding for these supportive resources.*

Peer support specialists can be particularly powerful for kids because kids can often relate to the specialist's own history with the juvenile or adult justice system. Trained and certified peer support specialists have the potential to (1) decrease risk factors among system-involved kids to lower their likelihood of re-offending, and increase soft skills that can improve outcomes for individuals, families, and communities, (2) bridge gaps in the behavioral health workforce to provide more individualized support to system-involved kids, and (3) create a career path for individuals who have lived experience with mental health, substance use, and/or justice system involvement.<sup>19</sup>

During the San Antonio visioning session, one woman suggested a program that would pay formerly incarcerated people to mentor youth: "Over 11 million of us have overcome addiction. Many of us who were formerly incarcerated have trouble finding traditional employment because of our criminal records. Give us an opportunity to mentor these children who nobody is mentoring."

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***It costs around \$160,000 per year for one child to be incarcerated in one of Texas' five state secure youth lockups. "With that money, parents wouldn't have to work as much and could be more present in their child's life. That money could go towards healthcare costs, or it could help pay for other services a child needs to avoid justice system involvement altogether, like education."***

Participant at the Houston visioning session

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**Proposed Solution:** Texas should examine opportunities to expand counseling, mentorship, and peer support services for youth. Encouraging supportive, healthy relationships for youth has proven benefits, including increased graduation rates, decreased likelihood of initiating drug and alcohol use, and improved behavior.<sup>20</sup> Investing in these services will foster healthier families and safer communities.

## Support for Families

*Across all visioning sessions, 6 percent of total votes were cast for providing parents and families with more support and resources.*

Research shows that families have a major influence on their child's achievements and successes in school and throughout life. Programming and services aimed at involving and engaging families increases the likelihood that kids will be successful. According to the National Center on Education, Disability, and Juvenile Justice, "Families have the potential to be the greatest source of positive change and support for youth in the juvenile justice system," yet families often do not have the tools they need to adequately support their children.<sup>21</sup>

**Proposed Solution:** Closing youth prisons and keeping kids closer to home, along with increased investments in diversion and alternatives to incarceration, would go a long way toward providing additional support for families. Further, raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction to include 17-year-olds would ensure that parents are able to maintain an active role in their child's adjudication process.

Above and beyond that, Texas should take all steps to ensure that relevant state agencies (especially in education, justice, and health systems), as well as local program providers, are implementing evidence-based practices or programs that encourage parental engagement in their children's lives, and that parents are aware of the practices and programs available in their communities.

“I’m a teacher myself, and I can tell you there is not enough communication between teachers, kids, and parents. Once they get to high school, it’s like they’re dropped. It seems like literally no one cares. My son was sitting in class and the teacher got to his name for roll and said he wasn’t there, but he was sitting right there. He said this let him know he is truly invisible.”

Participant at the Houston visioning session

# TAKEAWAYS FROM EACH VISIONING SESSION

On the following pages we offer insights from each of the four visioning sessions.

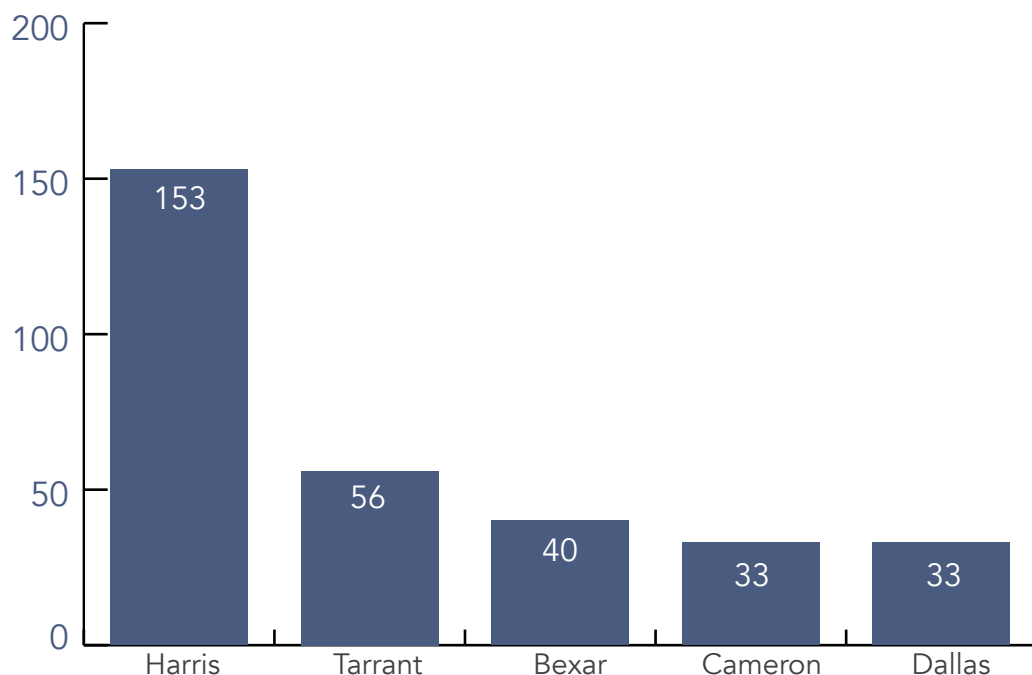
## Houston (Harris County)

### Why We Hosted a Visioning Session Here

As illustrated in the chart on page 2, Harris County referred the highest total number of kids to juvenile probation in 2016—which is why we kicked off our tour of counties in Houston. Harris County also committed the highest number of kids to the Texas Juvenile Justice Department (state secure youth lockups) in 2016, and it certified the highest number of kids to stand trial as adults.<sup>22</sup> Houston is ground zero for youth incarceration in Texas.

Local Houston officials are in the process of building a new juvenile detention center at an estimated cost of \$65–70 million.<sup>23</sup> To move on from the “lock ‘em up” status quo in Harris County, it is critical for local leaders to hear from system-impacted people and families, and others who want to see smarter public safety approaches.

### Number of Youth Committed to TJJD in 2016, Top Five Counties

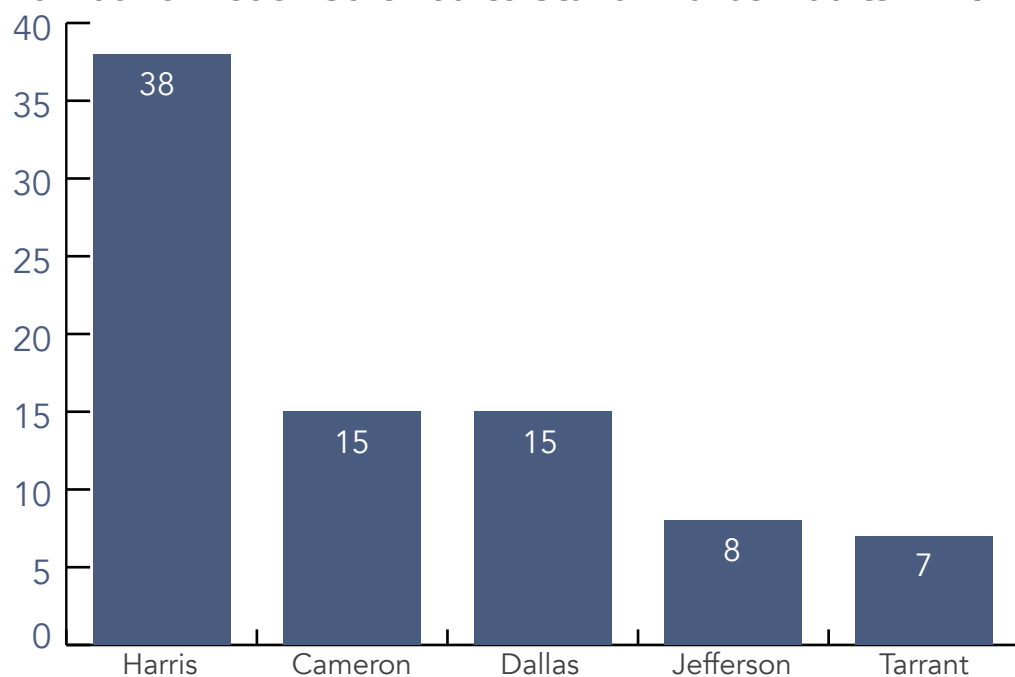


“Whether I was at church, on the block, or at my house, there was nowhere in my hood that I felt uncomfortable. And that’s because I had support at home, I had support in the street, I had support on the basketball court. When I got arrested the first time, it was the last time I was arrested. It wasn’t the last time because my mom whooped me—and she did. It wasn’t because my mom made me sit in jail for two days before she came and picked me up—and she did. It was because I had multiple levels of support. I had positive people in my life that never gave up on me. That was the only difference between me and somebody else.”

Participant at the Houston visioning session



## Number of Youth Certified to Stand Trial as Adults in 2016, Top Five Counties



### Age of Participants

- 20 years old or younger: 30%
- 21 to 35 years of age: 30%
- 36 to 50 years of age: 10%
- 51 years old or older: 30%

### Race/Ethnicity of Participants

- Caucasian/white: 60%
- Hispanic/Latinx: 10%
- Black: 30%

### Participants' Personal Experiences with the Justice System

- They or a loved one had direct experience with the criminal or juvenile justice system: 90%
- They are a victim or survivor of crime: 0%
- They lost a loved one to violence: 10%

We did not ask attendees at the Houston session about experiences with the incarceration of a parent or guardian; after the Houston session, it was suggested that we add this question to the evaluations.

### Top 3 Issues Identified by Participants

1. Raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction
2. Creating a more rehabilitative and therapeutic youth justice system
3. Reforming harsh sentencing for youth

*Attendees of the Houston session also highlighted the need for more counseling, better housing assistance, and greater investments in diversion and alternatives to incarceration.*

“A lot of times people will hear about something a kid has done and say they need to stay locked up forever. Where is the restorative justice? Where is the forgiveness? What if these were your kids? What we really need to be asking is what could we have done better here in Harris County?”

Participant at the Houston visioning session

## Arlington (representing Dallas and Tarrant Counties)

### Why We Hosted a Visioning Session Here

While Harris County had the highest number of total referrals to juvenile probation, Dallas County and Tarrant County had the second and fourth highest referrals. Combined, Dallas County and Tarrant County had nearly as many total referrals as Harris County.

Both Dallas County and Tarrant County were also in the top 5 counties for the highest number of kids committed to the Texas Juvenile Justice Department in 2016, and the highest number of kids to be certified as an adult.<sup>24</sup>

Because of their geographic closeness, we held one visioning session in Arlington for the general Dallas/Fort Worth Metro area.

### Age of Participants

- 20 years old or younger: 0%
- 21 to 35 years of age: 12%
- 36 to 50 years of age: 44%
- 51 years old or older: 44%

### Race/Ethnicity of Participants

- Caucasian/white: 50%
- Hispanic/Latinx: 25%
- Black: 25%

### Participants' Personal Experiences with the Justice System

- They or a loved one had direct experience with the criminal or juvenile justice system: 75%
- They are a victim or survivor of crime: 25%
- They lost a loved one to violence: 33%
- They have been directly impacted by the incarceration of a parent or guardian: 17%

### Top 3 Issues Identified by Participants

1. Raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction
2. Reforming harsh sentencing for youth
3. Closing youth prisons

*Attendees of the Arlington session also highlighted the need for shorter probation terms, greater investments in diversion and alternatives to incarceration, a more rehabilitative and therapeutic juvenile justice system, more counseling, the removal of police officers from schools, stronger investments in communities, and more mental health treatment.*

“Mentoring is a wonderful thing for youth. The problem is these youth prisons are in the middle of nowhere, so it’s hard to get people out to those facilities to mentor the youth.”

Participant at the Arlington visioning session

# Austin (Travis County)

## Why We Hosted a Visioning Session Here

Travis County had the fifth highest number of total referrals to juvenile probation in 2016, as well as the sixth highest rate of referral to probation per 1,000 youth.

Notably, Travis County is the only county we visited that did not certify any kids as adults in 2016.<sup>25</sup>

### Age of Participants

- 20 years old or younger: 66%
- 21 to 35 years of age: 0%
- 36 to 50 years of age: 17%
- 51 years old or older: 17%

### Race/Ethnicity of Participants

- Caucasian/white: 17%
- Hispanic/Latinx: 50%
- Black: 33%

### Participants' Personal Experiences with the Justice System

- They or a loved one had direct experience with the criminal or juvenile justice system: 92%
- They are a victim or survivor of crime: 33%
- They lost a loved one to violence: 50%
- They have been directly impacted by the incarceration of a parent or guardian: 58%

### Top 3 Issues Identified by Participants

1. Raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction
2. Creating a more rehabilitative and therapeutic juvenile justice system
3. Investing in diversion and alternatives to incarceration

*Attendees of the Austin session also highlighted the need for closing youth prisons, reforming harsh sentencing for youth, providing more support for parents and families, strategies to address racial disparities in the system, more counseling and peer support, more job training/educational support, and more mental health treatment.*

“I stole because my dad was too sick to go to the store for us. I was just trying to feed myself. Money changes a child’s whole perspective on life. If you have no car, you’re living under the bridge, and someone took your last ten dollars, you’re going to go rob somebody or do something to try to come up.”

Participant at the Austin visioning session

**“I’m the only Black person who lives in my entire apartment building. The only place I can feel safe is in my house.”**

Participant at the Austin visioning session

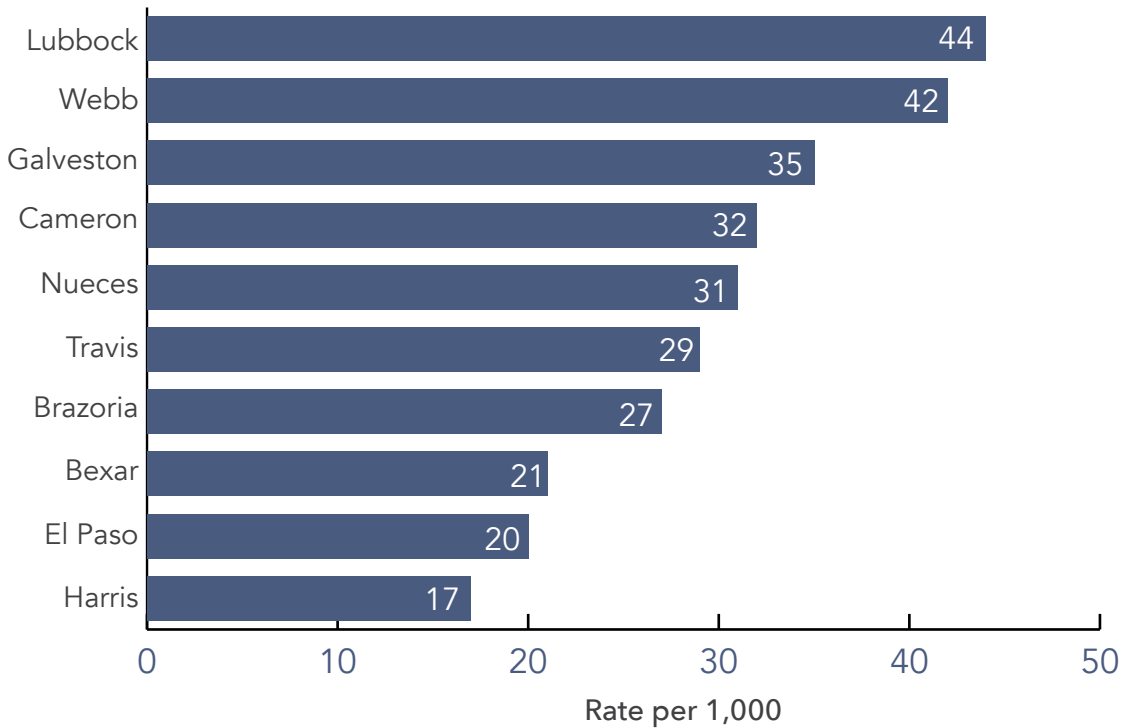
## San Antonio (Bexar County)

### Why We Hosted a Visioning Session Here

After Harris and Dallas Counties, Bexar County had the highest number of total referrals to juvenile probation.

Bexar County also committed the third highest number of kids to the Texas Juvenile Justice Department in 2016, and it had a fairly high rate of referral to probation per 1,000 youth.<sup>26</sup>

### Juvenile Probation Referral Rate/1,000 in 2016, Top 10 Counties



### Age of Participants

- 20 years old or younger: 7%
- 21 to 35 years of age: 7%
- 36 to 50 years of age: 29%
- 51 years old or older: 57%

### Race/Ethnicity of Participants

- Caucasian/white: 42%
- Hispanic/Latinx: 29%
- Black: 29%

## Participants' Personal Experiences with the Justice System

- They or a loved one had direct experience with the criminal or juvenile justice system: 64%
- They are a victim or survivor of crime: 55%
- They lost a loved one to violence: 55%
- They have been directly impacted by the incarceration of a parent or guardian: 27%

## Top 3 Issues Identified by Participants

1. Raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction
2. Creating a more rehabilitative and therapeutic juvenile justice system
3. Providing more support for parents and families

*Attendees of the San Antonio session also highlighted the need for reforming harsh sentencing for youth, greater investments in diversion and alternatives to incarceration, more counseling, more restorative justice programs, more training for those who come into regular contact with kids, independent oversight of the Youthful Offender Program (which houses kids in a Texas adult prison), and closing youth prisons.*

“We need to provide kids with more opportunities to earn money legally. Even a small paycheck can produce a lot of self-esteem and help with things they need for themselves.”

Participant at the San Antonio visioning session

# VOICES FROM INSIDE

At each youth justice visioning session, attendees heard stories from “The Second Look Book: A Collection of Stories from People Who Were Sentenced as Kids to Adult Prison in Texas.”

We reached out to people currently serving an extreme sentence in an adult prison for an offense committed as a kid. We specifically asked them, “*What could have prevented you from ending up in the criminal justice system?*”

This is what they had to say:

“These children do not know anything about those of us who were locked up and thrown away by the state. We need to be made real to them. They need to know our stories, see our pictures.” – BRYAN

“I thought life as it was for me was the same way for others. Now I realize just how much I lacked. I know how other kids feel, I know their pain, because I have scars of my own. If I would have been given the chance to be placed in a juvenile facility, and not sent straight to prison, I know I’d be home by now—a humble man, with goals and skills and a passion to give back to the community. Prison is not the only option for a child offender to be rehabilitated.” – THOMAS

“The most important ingredient missing in my life was love.” – JASON

“When I was growing up, my family was so poor I couldn’t even think, much less focus on doing classwork or progressing in school.” – JOHNNY

“I’m a strong believer in talking to and actually listening to what kids have to say because they are our future and we must pay attention to them in order to guide them. Kids need real people to look up to and emulate, not only celebrities and professional ball players. We must take time out of our busy days in order to do that, for the most precious gift you can give a child is your time.” – ROBERT

“I just wish there was some way Texas could come up with a better justice system, period, especially for youth. We are still humans. When someone is so young, peer pressure can make you do stupid things and make bad decisions.” – CARLOS

“Having someone in my life who I could talk to and trust would’ve been crucial. Talking is cathartic, whether it’s a parent, a teacher, a counselor, a coach, or a friend. Crisis hotlines, counseling services, and mentorship programs are great outlets to have, but their use is often predicated on the initiation of a troubled kid seeking help.” – CHON

“During 9th grade, I started to fail my classes. The basketball coach, who had heard about my athletic ability and passion, gave me a chance to try out for the team, and if I made it, as long as I could raise my grades up, I could join the team. I jumped at the chance and came to school every day. I brought my grades up, which was a miracle. Then, about three weeks into the season, I got into a fight during school and the coach kicked me off the team. The last ember of hope was put out and with no motivation to do good, my life spiraled out of control and I crash landed in the Galveston County juvenile department at 16 years old. Having someone to believe in, mentor, and encourage me would’ve motivated me to keep striving to do good. Juveniles are sometimes too easily and prematurely given up on. The streets are full of youth with potential and shattered dreams. Kids need and want someone to support them, especially those from broken and neglectful homes. When they have support, the sky’s the limit!” – JEREMY

“I didn’t matter to anyone. I was passed back and forth from the time I was three years old. There was never any stability, accountability, or safety felt in any place I lived. I had the attitude at 16 years old of ‘why try or care? No one cares about me anyway, so it doesn’t matter what I do.’ Had I had someone take interest in me and my life, like a school counselor or big sister program, I feel I would have made dramatically different choices at 16 years old.” – MARIE

## CONCLUSION

It is critical that the voices of Texas residents – particularly those most affected by youth incarceration – are at the forefront of local and statewide conversations around youth justice. These visioning sessions allowed us to connect directly with those folks, and the feedback we received was resounding.

Policy-makers should take note of the themes that arose from these sessions and collaborate with these communities to address the harms being done. Together, we can ensure that Texas is a place where kids are treated like kids, families are more supported, communities are healthier, and incarceration is rare.

# ENDNOTES

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# ON THE LINE

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