

# ENDING THE CRIMINALIZATION OF YOUTH

**ADDRESS THE ROOT**

CONNECTICUT  
**JUSTICE**  
ALLIANCE  
2022



**“No one can take education away from you. The more you have, the better job you can get, to change. They need that change. They need a break.”**

**VISION SESSION PARTICIPANT**

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# INTRODUCTION



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## LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Historically, communities in Connecticut that are made up of people who look like me- Black and Brown- have been defunded. Year after year there is another reason to cut programming that is working well for young people, remove school funding that young people need to be successful, and to criminalize young people- this list only touches the tip of the iceberg that is the intentional divestment in communities of color in Connecticut.

The pandemic continues to shine a bright light on what many of us know to be true in Connecticut, that the structural racism of Connecticut's education, legal, workforce, food, systems (to name a few) create a

## VISION SESSION PARTICIPANT

"No one wants to really have this conversation. Its poverty, housing insecurity, lack of opportunity as a result of redlining. We're at this point because of policy failure. It's society that failed here. Root causes need to be addressed."

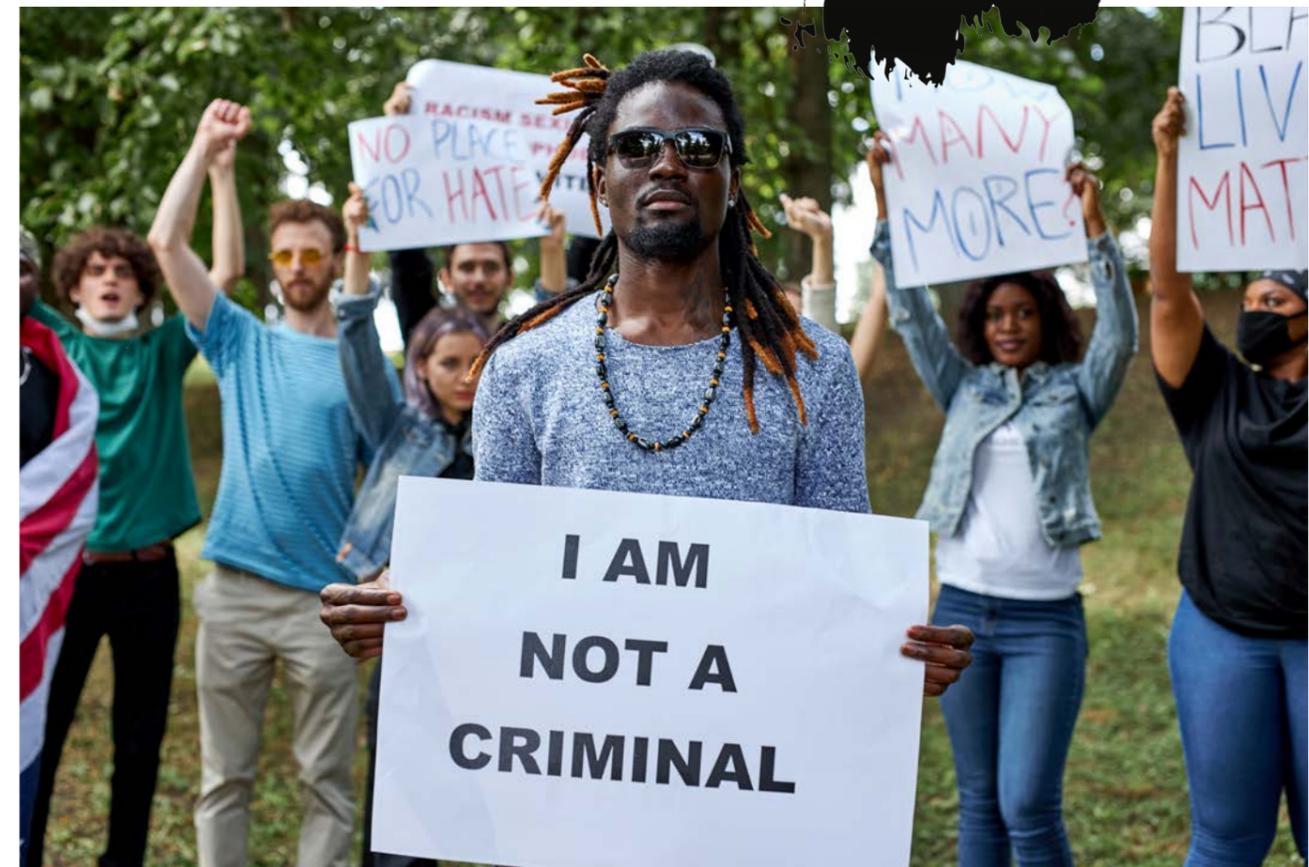
lack of investment in Black and Brown communities. Inevitably this leads to large inequities in resources, huge achievement gaps in education, and leaves communities in a state of neglect - this isn't fair. Connecticut is the richest state in the United States of America. There is no excuse for this. Divestment is a choice. Choices have consequences.

Connecticut continues to invest in police, incarceration, and other punitive measures that are shown by research to not improve public safety or reduce crime. Connecticut must begin to reallocate funding from police, prisons and jails, and other forces that harm people into communities to ensure they are being built up by the state- not broken

## FACT

Locking up youth in adult prison does not address root issues. According to a recent state audit, the overwhelming majority of transferred boys, and all of the transferred girls, in the adult system during 2019 lived in families previously investigated for child abuse or neglect, often multiple times.

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# INTRODUCTION CONTINUED



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down.

Communities are the experts on what they need to be successful. In this report, “Ending the Criminalization of Youth: Revisited,” we revisit our first report with the reinforced themes we laid out in 2020. It is so important to listen to what young people, communities, and other system stakeholders say. That information is key to identifying gaps, needs, and what needs to be transformed- or completely abolished. In 2020 Connecticut Justice Alliance began a second tour of Vision Sessions. We held dozens of them and talked to those most impacted by the defunding of their communities. We also talked to those who are a part of the systems that can be harmful to

## WHAT ARE VISION SESSIONS?

**A vision session is a 1-2 hour time Justice Advisors spend listening to youth, families, & communities to hear about their experiences, strengths, challenges, & recommendations. The purpose of a vision session is to gather input & opinions from those in or impacted by the youth legal system so that their expertise can guide the priorities and work of CTJA, and the decisions of policy-makers at the local and state level.**

youth and communities.

Throughout this report, we included direct quotes from our Vision Sessions to highlight the real words of those that live the injustices of the criminalization of youth and the constant and consistent lack of investment in Black and Brown communities.

Connecticut Justice Alliance and its partners and allies must now move forward with renewed commitment and energy to demand investment in our children. We must all demand that the experts not be closed out of discussion about their communities- ‘nothing about us without us.’

**Christina Quaranta**  
Executive Director  
Connecticut Justice Alliance

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# THE STATE OF YOUTH JUSTICE IN CT



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## CONNECTICUT JUSTICE ALLIANCE: 2022

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, March 2020, began a period of time where people did not know what to expect. Everything that was once normal and routine, was not. A simple trip to the grocery store or a day at school was dangerous. Systems and their ability to respond to and support communities were pushed to the limit as people dealt with, and continue to deal with, illness, social and emotional isolation, loss of employment, death, lack of education, and almost every other struggle you can think of. The year 2020 and those following it, showed just how important it is to address the root of the behavior of young people- when young peoples' and communities' needs go unmet, unrest is the result.

The pandemic heightened the needs that already existed in communities: The need for equal opportunities, housing security, economic security, hope, systemic accountability, positive role models/credible messengers, and the need to address trauma.

Connecticut's children have been disproportionately supported throughout the entire pandemic, which continues as the world begins to open back up. While many communities have fully invested in wrap-around support of young people, Connecticut's more vulnerable children and families are feeling the impact of injustice and inequitable systems even more so than before 2020.

Many children went without needed programming, services, resources, and education. Incarcerated people continue to live in conditions that negatively affect their health and violate their civil rights. Each of the seven themes that were highlighted in our previous report, themes that contributed to young people being pushed into the legal system, were exacerbated during the pandemic.

Initially, there were some additional and increased resources made available such as an enhanced Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) program, holds on renter evictions, and boosted unemployment benefits-but these things were not enough. Many of these resources and opportunities to get ahead have ended as of the printing of this report.

A Connecticut Voices for Children report released in 2021, states that between August 19, 2020, and March 1, 2021, Black and Hispanic households reported class cancellations at higher rates, meaning that in addition to dealing with the struggles that come with remote learning, these groups of students were potentially more likely to miss out on learning opportunities altogether.

Along with missing important hours in the classroom, many children went without the guaranteed meal that comes with school attendance or the check-in with a trusted adult or friend. The Voices report spoke not just of the impact the pandemic played in eliminating true educational support, but dove deep into the economic impact the pandemic had on families, specifically children.

Connecticut Voices for Children examined data that was collected from August 19, 2020, through March 1, 2021. The data showed that an average of 50.7% of survey respondents, ages 18 to 24, reported experiencing a decrease in employment income, compared to 50.5% for respondents ages 25 to 39, and 51.5% for respondents ages 40 to 54.

This means that from ages 18-54, the 18-24 population experienced the highest decrease in

## FACT

Currently, youth aged 15-17 whose cases are transferred to adult court are placed in adult facilities pre- and post-trial: Manson Youth Institution (MYI) and York Correctional Institution (York). These facilities, services, and staff are not created for or trained to be effective for youth and therefore are not appropriate for youth under 25.

CTJA recognizes youth as people under the age of 25 and feels strongly that adult prison is not the appropriate placement for this group of people.

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## THE STATE OF YOUTH JUSTICE IN CT CONT.

employment. What happens when people no longer receive income, and education, and are forced to live isolated for more than 2 years? What happens when those incarcerated can't stay safe, sane, and healthy? As you can imagine, with what is now 2 years of unstable education, support, and interactions, young people- and entire communities-are struggling.

Connecticut hasn't developed comprehensive, sustainable plans to address these issues of insecurity. There has been and continues to be, a lot of conversation on how to address the connection between these structural breakdowns, the lack of support and youth crime. While the entire world is struggling in some way due to the pandemic, the load has fallen heavier on communities that have long been divested in. When politicians are discussing what to do to address youth crime, the idea of addressing the root is not one that is often pointed to, rather punishment is often the most popular choice of how to deal with young people who have committed a crime.

From our Vision Sessions, it was a majority opinion there was a need to address the issues at the root causes. This means identifying the lack of funding and support for equitable systems of community investment. There is a clear need to address the impact on predominantly Black and Brown communities - only heightened by the pandemic - and a call for accountability of those who have the power to make decisions regarding investment and resource sharing. Pushing children deeper into the legal system that is not built to support them, only heightens the problems they are experiencing and that we heard about in the Vision Sessions. Punishment does not, and has never, addressed the root causes of behavior.

As mentioned above, many believe that increasing penalties and the ability to incarcerate more young people is the best way to hold communities accountable. It has been proven through research that incarceration and punishment are not a deterrent to crime, nor do they reduce the likelihood of it happening. What does? Addressing the root causes of crime.

Connecticut incarcerates children in adult prison. Young men being tried as adults are held at Manson Youth Institution (MYI) while young women are being held at York Correctional Institution (York). As of February 2022, 90% of MYIs under 18 population is there pre-trial, meaning they're still waiting to be sentenced. A majority of the young people at MYI are Black and Brown youth.

All of us have a responsibility for how we speak about young people and how decisions are made to meet the needs of young people. If Connecticut has false information about young peoples' actions, Connecticut will be unable to create effective and sustainable long-term solutions.

There's a false assumption that adult prisons are properly equipped to serve and rehabilitate young people. That is untrue and is dangerous. CTJA's first report discussed the Federal Department of Justice opening an investigation into conditions at MYI for 15-17-year-olds in the fall of 2019. At that time, even though the state was required to have a plan for how to remove youth from the adult system by January 2020, no plan was created. In 2021, legislation passed to

### VISION SESSION PARTICIPANT

**"Bridgeport school students have different needs compared to students in Greenwich. Those are very wealthy kids. Their need is different. I haven't worked there but I can guarantee it's different. Hartford, New Haven, and Waterbury may be similar to Bridgeport, but Waterbury has like 500 arrests a year. We (Bridgeport) have 40."**

create a plan to transfer pre-trial youth under the age of 18, being tried as adults, from the housing of the Department of Corrections (DOC) to the custody of the Judicial Branch: Court Support Services Division (CSSD).

The expectation was that a transfer plan would be submitted to the General Assembly by January 2022. The Judicial Branch plan submitted proposes doing extensive construction on a closed youth prison-the Connecticut Juvenile Training School (CJTS)- and reopening it to incarcerate those children, using it as a space to transfer pretrial kids from DOC to CSSD. CJTS is the leading option due to the belief there is no other feasible option.

This is wrong. Moving children from one prison to another does not address the root of crime. Yes, children should not be held in adult prison- but our ask is that if they must be removed from their community, they are removed for a short period of time in a placement that is close to their home, given the resources and education that they need, and then allowed to return to their homes- having their root issues addressed. Instead in

the system that exists today, young people are housed in adult prison and return home without the necessary resources and education- and have a high chance of returning to prison because Connecticut is about the punishment of people, not betterment.

In February 2022, the Department of Justice released an official statement stating they've finalized their investigation into Manson Youth Institution and concluded there is reasonable cause to believe MYI's isolation practices and lack of mental health services harm children under the age of 18 and place them at risk of serious harm, violating the U.S Constitution. It was also stated Manson does not provide the appropriate special education services to those in need, violating the Individuals with Disabilities Act. The very place where we house children in adult prison was found to violate their civil rights. Children are still incarcerated inside of that prison as you read this report.

When the citizens of Connecticut talk about how young people should be treated in our state, how they should be invested in, and what should happen when they commit a serious crime- we must remember that all of those have one answer- address the root cause. Treat children how you would treat your own. It's important to remember that we are not limited to what is presented in the plan submitted by the Judicial Branch. While CTJA participated in the planning committee of the implementation plan we are strongly opposed to the construction and reopening of the Connecticut Juvenile Training School. We must revisit the options and create a solution that isn't moving young people from one prison to another. Connecticut must do better for the young people in our state, especially those that have made life-altering decisions and need the highest level of care and treatment- not incarceration. Young people need a true investment of resources, time, care, and love; they do not need more options to be involved in something negative.

# YOUTH CRIME IN CT



## FACT VS. FICTION

To understand the correlation between the pandemic and youth crime, you have to understand how we got to where we are.

“Historically, communities of color have not been invested in, have been the targets of budget cuts, and most often have the most police- instead of the most resources in their communities and in their schools. These issues in treatment and the ugly way that racism rears its ugly head in Connecticut, have caused communities that are made up of Black and Brown people to be at a disadvantage when it comes to resources that are given to them. Connecticut is a state with glaring racial and ethnic disparities and the pandemic that rocked the world in March of 2020 has exacerbated that.

Starting with all of the challenges already listed, that currently continue, there was a national movement early on in the pandemic after the murder of George Floyd by a police officer and the recording of his death was shown and seen across all media platforms. Communities most impacted led advocacy and organizing efforts worldwide, more closely here all across Connecticut - some in partnership with young people and others fully led by youth organizations. Along with the accomplishments following these efforts, also comes the trauma these kinds of things imposed upon people of color - watching someone be dehumanized and have their life taken from them with no accountability, exposes the true injustices of our system and the impacts of racism. The second-hand trauma from situations were not addressed. With unaddressed trauma comes unintended consequences.

In Connecticut, there is a lot of mistruth being spoken and written about young

people and crime. There is a statewide assumption that all young people, primarily Black and Brown youth, are criminals. People have gone as far as to say that there is no system of accountability in place for young people who commit serious offenses.

There are many different opinions that drive false narratives about these issues, but we can only discuss the facts. Many Connecticut families, organizations, people, and legislators have been asking for the investments needed to address the gaps in the current system. Young people are impacted by this lack of investment now more than ever. All of the things discussed up until this point were gaps that should have been filled decades ago. It is a choice not to address the root cause of crime, not to invest in youth and whole communities. With choices come consequences.

## VISION SESSION PARTICIPANT

“Understanding students that make poor choices are not bad students, let’s get them the help they need to try to learn from their mistakes. Even the kids that shoot people, they’re not bad kids. They make bad choices.”

One should be grounded in the following about crime in Connecticut before entering into debate:

## FACTS

- 1) Until the beginning of 2020, overall youth arrest rates were decreasing consistently and there is no evidence that any previous laws passed impacted any rise in crime
- 2) Crimes such as car thefts are opportunity crimes and opportunity crimes are known to heighten when people are dealing with financial stability, hence the pandemic
- 3) Based on data from the Judicial Branch in 2020-2021, Connecticut is still experiencing the lowest (14,310) numbers of youth cases since the most dated record in 1991(17,296)
- 4) Connecticut could reduce youth crime if we invested in the resources that are identified by communities - prisons are proven to do more harm than good, especially the adult system
- 5) When Connecticut closed the Connecticut Juvenile Training School Connecticut did not properly fund or plan for alternatives and programming for young people, specifically those considered high risk and Connecticut should start by filling the gaps, not the detention or prison facilities.

# THE NEED FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

## ADDRESS THE ROOT

Our first report was a breakdown of recommendations and needs CTJA heard during Vision Sessions. The purpose of a Vision Session is to gather input & opinions from those involved in or impacted by the youth legal system so that their expertise can guide the priorities and work of CTJA, and the decisions of policy makers at the local and state level.

These Vision Sessions are led by Justice Staff and Advisors and are usually structured in the form of activity. From 2017 to 2020 we held 20 Vision Sessions with 150 participants total, primarily being young people involved in or impacted by the legal system.

## VISION SESSION PARTICIPANT

“What would you say is the biggest issue contributing to the school to prison pipeline?” “Deep rooted trauma that’s been going on for generations. Kids got to understand, we need mentors, there’s more inside of life than the corner they grew up on. It’s not their fault. It’s a deep rooted trauma we have to address.”

Limited by the pandemic, since our last report in 2020, CTJA has hosted 14 Vision Sessions with more than 70 participants. In early 2022 we began holding in-person Vision Sessions.

In 2022 we expanded who we’ve met with to include not only impacted young people, and families, but also school resource officers, legislative workgroups, and community members.

Our previous report highlighted seven root causes participants identified that led young people into the system, all rooted in racism or bias:

- Housing Insecurity
- Economic Insecurity
- Need For More Credible Messengers and Lack of Trust in the System
- Lack of Equal Opportunities
- Trauma Caused Within Communities
- Lack of Hope

When we went through our internal reports from the Vision Sessions held between 2020 through January 2022, we used coding and theming methods that allowed us to pull specific statements from our notes and attach them to a theme that we previously identified or a new theme. Overall, in every Vision Session, we heard at least one or more of each theme come up. These three points came up constantly:

- 1) The need to honestly address racial inequities in the system
- 2) A societal disconnect between what young people need and what drives their actions
- 3) An over-reliance on police to maintain order, particularly in Black and Brown communities

All three core themes are rooted in a systemically racist system that youth are forced to navigate on a daily basis.



# CHALLENGES

## AN UNWILLINGNESS TO ADDRESS THE ROOT CAUSE

As shared earlier in this report, there are mixed thoughts statewide about how to address youth crime. What we know for sure is Vision Session participants recognize that there's a misconception about young people's needs and the causes of their actions.

For example, we asked a group of 8 young people currently in the system and 4 adults whether or not they believe kids steal cars due to older influencers, gang initiation, or simply because they know that the youth legal system will "not hold them accountable", as the current statewide narrative implies. All of the young people disagreed with that statement, yet all of the adults either agreed or felt neutral.

For context, we were already almost an hour into a super raw conversation about many rhetorics - so the trust to be transparent was already established. This clearly showed us that adults have assumptions about young people's actions due to what they hear, which young people themselves did not agree with.

There was also a lot of conversation about the difference from community to community, and how inner-city residents didn't feel as if other towns could relate to them or understand the barriers and challenges that they face, especially during a pandemic. For example, we hosted a conversation in West Hartford about police in schools that ended very differently than it started.

When the conversation started, the participants were not in agreement with the idea of removing police from schools. By the end of the conversation, most participants continued to support school resources officers, but recognized they might not be as effective in a city such as Waterbury. This had nothing to do with the actual police presence, but everything to do with perception. Police in schools give the perception of criminality and put students closer to the justice system than a student going to school without police in the halls.

This showed us that within a 2-hour time frame, we were able to expose participants to a reality they were unaware of. We were able to achieve that consensus after educating the group more about our personal experiences in schools with police in comparison to data that speaks to expulsion and arrest rates in schools where police are present, along with talking out loud about the negative impacts of incarcerating people and not solving the root issues. All of that to say, there was a large misconception at the beginning of the conversation and participants discussed these kinds of issues in every Vision Session we hosted.

During a Vision Session, police officers acknowledged they felt as if a lot of youth in the current system have issues going on at homes such as living instabilities (financial or housing), single-parent homes, incarcerated parents, unaddressed trauma, generational trauma, lack of services, no role models or guidance, and many emphasized that these children often have special education needs - which we have seen rise in many Vision Sessions.

Vision Sessions are impactful conversations that reveal a lot about the systems we all have to live with. CTJA staff member, Iliana Pujols, often speaks about an experience she had when she first came on board as a Justice Advisor. She was participating in a circle conversation where a retired prosecutor spoke about how he used to recommend black kids go to jail and white kids go to programs because he felt as if "white kids couldn't hold their own inside a facility."

Although he recognized the negative impact of his racially biased decision, we can't ignore that those are the unfortunate misconceptions that we have about young people and how they should be supported and held accountable.

This allows folks to ignore the fact that Connecticut needs to invest in youth services instead of locking up young people in an adult prison, which is not built to work with young people and has been found to not meet the needs of their population.

Connecticut has been progressive with youth reforms over the recent years, yet Connecticut must invest in ways to meet the needs of the small population of young people that Connecticut has been unable to reach and implement support for them. These are young people who have the decks stacked against them- perhaps they were arrested at a young age, did not have the resources they needed as a child, or they attend a school that fails to invest in their students. It's time Connecticut stood up and invested in young people who are of greatest need, instead of meeting them with punishment and dehumanization.

Connecticut cannot underestimate the challenges that young people deal with. The day to day struggles of a young person is something that is not well understood by society as a whole. Adults do not often imagine that children are taking on mountains of responsibilities and do some without the proper resources. Especially during the pandemic, children are struggling mentally and emotionally. Youth Vision Session participants mentioned pandemic challenges that ranged from food insecurity to the inability to cope without in-person contact. All of this struggle that youth and their families are dealing with are made worse by rising domestic violence in homes.

The Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence reported helping nearly 5,000 children in 2021 and shelters were over capacity throughout most of the year with occupancy up 126 percent. This underlines the importance of people needing to recognize the challenges our young people are facing and how we can not assume their intent or reasoning behind their actions without getting to the root of the problem. Young people who are experiencing homelessness or are victims of domestic violence do not need more punishment. They need help and investment of resources.

# THE IMPACT OF OVER-RELIANCE ON POLICE

The over-reliance on police use was a huge issue that came up in almost every Vision Session conversation, especially those centered on discussing police in schools. We posed a question asking a group of officers what they thought the purpose of school resource officers are.

One participant said “They use their authority in conjunction with the school. If the principal says take off your hat, and you don’t, (the SRO) is going to tell you to and then it can escalate and become an arrest. We don’t need to be there for that, that’s administrative business”.

This wasn’t a sentiment shared by just one officer, but many, from different areas across the state. The overall role of police in schools is to protect the school, yet school staff members have become reliant on police disciplining children for normal behavior instead of using restorative tools that do not involve police contact. This has not only put a lot on the officers’ plate, but this continues to expose youth to, and funnel them directly into, the youth and adult legal system.

Many participants expressed not fully understanding the exact role of police in the community, due to the large number of responsibilities they are given. One officer shared an example of being called to a mother and child dispute in the community and said they didn’t know what to do because the officer couldn’t relate because they were not a parent themselves. In situations like that, participants recommended creating crisis response teams from the community that could help support families in crisis.

Response teams already exist in Connecticut, primarily for adults, but creating something specific

## VISION SESSION PARTICIPANT

“If I believed arresting kids would work, I would arrest all of them. But it doesn’t work”



to meet the needs of young people is needed. This issue of relying on police to respond to smaller crises is not new nor unheard of in Connecticut.

For example, early into the pandemic, the Office of the Child Advocate released findings after investigating concerns that Waterbury schools overused police authority to address child behavior issues. Their investigation found:

*“From September 2018 through March 2019, there were approximately 200 calls to police made by Waterbury elementary and Pre-K through Grade 8 schools as a result of a child’s behavior, typically either a behavioral health crisis or an act of physical aggression by a child or multiple children, with children as young as 4 and 5 the subject of calls to police... More than half of the schools called police to respond to children more often than they called Emergency Mobile Crisis intervention teams. No elementary schools had dedicated clinical support in-house.”*

Vision Sessions participants expressed the need for us to get back to the culture of “it takes a village to raise a family”, and unite as communities to create successful pathways for young people and families. This means exploring alternatives to police and divesting in areas that we know do not work. The over-reliance on police is resulting in more Black and Brown young people being pushed into the system.

## FACT

Locking up youth in adult prison does not address root issues. According to a recent state audit, the overwhelming majority of transferred boys, and all of the transferred girls, in the adult system during 2019 lived in families previously investigated for child abuse or neglect, often multiple times.

# NEED TO ADDRESS RACIAL INEQUITIES IN THE SYSTEM

As highlighted earlier in this report, all of these issues are rooted in racism and bias, both current and as a part of Connecticut's history. In every Vision Session, we have held since 2017, participants brought up systemic inequities based on their experiences and expertise.

In July 2021, the Sentencing Project released fact sheets sharing that Connecticut has the sixth highest Black/white disparity in the U.S.A. This data reveals that Connecticut's Black youth are 10.6 times more likely than their white counterparts to be incarcerated, a disparity that CTJA has seen in our work over the years.

In 2021, there were 299 admissions to detention centers in Connecticut. Out of those 299 admissions, more than half were Black youth (180). In 2021, there were 37 admissions to REGIONS, Connecticut's youth prison facilities. Out of those 37 admissions, 21 were Black.

As of February 2022, 80% of Mason Youth Institution's youth population (15-17 years old) identifies as Black or Latin(a/x). In Connecticut, Black students make up 13% of the state's population yet 68% of the student population at MYI. This means that we are disproportionately incarcerating kids of color in Connecticut.

We held a Vision Session where we asked a group of young people what their dream program looked like and they said, "A program where you're not looked at as a statistic or a criminal. A program where you're treated like a person. A program where you're treated equally."

The only way to achieve true success is to commit to removing the toughest barriers: racism and bias. As of now, the state does not have a clear plan to address racism and bias, yet there are policy recommendations and efforts to track and address racial data more appropriately, however, these have yet to be taken up in the legislature and/or be signed into law.

## VISION SESSION PARTICIPANT

"Kids got to understand, we need mentors, there's more inside of life than the corner they grew up on. It's not their fault. It's a deep rooted trauma we have to address as parents."



# JUSTICE REIMAGINED

There are many challenges to addressing the gaps that currently exist in the legal system and within communities, and Connecticut is aware of the solutions that work.

During multiple Vision Sessions, we asked participants what alternatives to incarceration look like and if they could design a program that serves high-risk young people what would it consist of.

Across all Vision Sessions, we heard the need to be hiring credible messengers or mentors who can work with young people one on one, because participants felt as if a lack of guidance or support plays a key role in what young people do.

Multiple groups recommended creating specialized "locked spaces" that would allow young people the space to disconnect from their communities, but that were not designed or structured as a prison or detention facility.

Incarcerating young people is not only ineffective but extremely expensive. Instead of spending **\$864-\$1,424 per day** on incarcerating young people in the youth legal system, we should be investing that money in areas where we know needs investment: behavioral health, programs have proven effective by those directly impacted, building relationships and connections within communities to support community-based programs, expanding housing resources, investing in youth job programs and education pathways, and other areas we've highlighted within our work.

Some programs and models work in Connecticut and other states - we need to adapt them

to meet the needs of our most vulnerable young people. StreetSafe in Bridgeport is an example of a Connecticut-based program that hires credible messengers to work one on one with their communities' most at-risk young people.

Young people who participated in the Vision Sessions discussed reimagining the system and creating more roles and involvement for credible messengers and other mentor-like positions that allow them the opportunity to learn from people they can relate to. Every participant discussed the importance of relationships and how programs often aren't effective because the staff is not relatable.

There are also programs such as Our Piece of the Pie in Hartford that provide a

wide variety of career and education pathway support, including re-entry services. Nationally, we have programs such as Youth Advocate Programs (YAP) that tap into community-based programs and leaders to create wrap-around services that are available 24/7, for young people and explore alternatives to incarceration or ways to reduce incarcerated populations. As of July 2022, YAP will be running programs in Connecticut. We will be following up on the progress of programming done by YAP.

With all of the examples of programs that can support Connecticut to get to a place where we can consistently and effectively reduce the amount of youth that come in contact with the system, we need to commit to these investments.

Participants often mentioned the inconsistencies in programming or services, and how they often will find a resource they truly enjoy or benefit from, and then the next thing they know it's closed due to lack of funding.

Connecticut needs to do a better job at addressing the behavioral health issues and trauma that young people experience- all young people, even

those who have system involvement. As of February 2022, over 60% of MYI's youth population has been diagnosed with mental health issues, while being incarcerated in a facility that was found to violate children's civil rights in December 2021.

The only way Connecticut Will achieve effective program and service development is if Connecticut partners with those directly impacted and has conversations about what is working, what is not, and what is needed. There are many on-the-ground organizations that have been doing community outreach to identify solutions to current issues. Connecticut needs its system leaders to tap into that existing work and work with those to fill the gaps.

Our Vision Sessions have reinforced the fact that Connecticut continues to manufacture flawed plans from the top down. There are too many policies and programming decisions made without the community that has resulted in all of these gaps that we heard about in Vision Sessions and that we see in our day-to-day interactions with youth and communities.

We have to invest dollars and be creative when thinking about how to work with young people who make mistakes and who may commit and be a victim of crime. The attitude of "arrest and detain" has never worked- it does not address the root issue- and we all live in a world where system involvement does more than just penalize- it dehumanizes and creates barriers for basic living.

## FACT

Currently, some districts in Connecticut invest more money in school resources officers than they do in nurses. By default, SROs do not receive training in mental health services and therefore are not the appropriate persons to respond to behavioral issues.



## HERE ARE SOME WAYS THAT YOU CAN ACT

**Be a part** of addressing the root by signing on to #IIMCT

**Donate** to end the criminalization of youth

**Refer or apply** to be a Justice Advisor

**Reach out** so we can collaborate

**Connect** with your local legislator

# CONCLUSION

The need for equal opportunities, housing security, economic security, hope, systemic accountability, positive role models/credible messengers, and the need to address trauma existed long before the pandemic. However, the pandemic did allow us to truly see and hear how the systems of oppression continue to fail Black and Brown youth.

In order to move forward with our mission to end the criminalization of youth, we must have clear goals that are driven and co created by community members, most importantly those impacted by the systems of oppression. We commit to intentionally moving forward with our work to get a better understanding of how to demand change based on the three most common themes that we heard in our most recent Vision Sessions: 1) The need to honestly address racial inequities in the legal systems 2) The need to bridge the societal disconnect and misunderstanding between what young people need and what drives their actions 3) The need to address the over-reliance on police to maintain order, particularly in Black and Brown communities

In Vision Sessions we have heard from a variety of people: law enforcement, youth, and all other stakeholders in our communities, to name a few: Prison-like environments stunt the growth of youth and the communities they live in and prevent healing. They are another layer of trauma.

Connecticut, despite being further along the track to transform its legal systems than many other states, still has a lot of work to do. The dark cloud of racism that is ever present in systems of oppression, leads to a lack of funding, defunding, or completely not funding initiatives that address the root cause of crime in our communities. This is a problem. In order to end the criminalization of youth and increase safety for all people in Connecticut, we are all responsible for addressing the root causes of behavior.

All of us have a responsibility for how we speak about young people and how decisions are made to meet the needs of young people and the communities they call home. Connecticut must create long term solutions that are identified by community members, and that are effective and sustainable. Connecticut must provide equitable resources and services for all.

Addressing the root causes of problems in communities: Housing insecurity, economic insecurity, need for more credible messengers and positive influences, lack of trust in the system and abuse of authority, lack of equal opportunities, trauma caused within communities, and lack of hope will serve all of us better than criminalizing children.

Prisons are not properly equipped to serve and rehabilitate young people. Consequences must teach a new lesson, not simply punish.

People who are closest to the problem, are closest to the solution. People who are impacted by the systems of oppression must have a seat at the tables where decisions are being made. CTJA promises to continue to hold Vision Sessions so we hear directly from those most impacted about what works best for them and we hope to reach those with closed minds and show them that there is a better way to care for and invest in our youth. We promise to hold the state of Connecticut responsible for investing in our youth. If we all work together to address the root causes of crime, we can end the criminalization of youth in Connecticut.

# GLOSSARY

## **Affluent**

Wealthy; Prosperous; Rich

## **Criminalize**

To treat as a criminal

## **Criminalization**

The act of making a previously legal activity illegal

## **Directly Impacted**

Something that has directly affected someone or something

## **Dismantle**

To take apart

## **Disrupt**

To break up or disturb something's course; Stop something from happening

## **Equitable (Equitably)**

Something that is fair to all parties

## **Explicit Bias**

Tendency to mentally lean in a certain direction intentionally

## **Implicit Bias**

Tendency to mentally lean in a certain direction unintentionally

## **Inequality**

A difference in size, amount, quality, social position or another factor

## **Legislature**

A state legislature is a term referring to the legislative body of any of the country's 50 states. The formal name varies from state to state.

## **Liberation**

Being set free or obtaining equal rights

## **Oppression**

Treating people unfairly, especially with overuse of government power; Can also mean a feeling of being weighed down, as with worries or problems; physical or mental distress

## **Reform**

To correct someone or something or cause someone or something to be better

## **Representative**

A person elected by a to be a member of the House of Representatives.

## **Reinvestment**

To reinvest in something; Put whatever sort of investment (whether time, money, care, love, etc.) into something

## **Restorative Justice**

Any of several forms of justice that attempts to repair the harm done to the victim and to the larger community (this can include apology letters, mediation, community service, or other forms of restitution)

## **Stakeholders**

A person who has an interest in or investment in something and who is impacted by and cares about how it turns out (this can be a lawmaker, teacher, coach, lawyer, organization, and more)

## **Youth/Adult Partnership**

The title of a conscious relationship that establishes and maintains equity between young people and adults



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## FACT

Data shows that youth who are detained or incarcerated may be more likely to reoffend than their peers who aren't, meaning that using detention and incarceration can have the opposite effect that people are hoping for. According to the Judicial Branch of CT, Court Support Services Division, detention costs about \$800 per child per day. In 2018, the average length of a stay in detention was 14 days - that's \$11,200 spent each time we put a child in juvenile detention. In 2021 the average length of a stay in detention was 23 days - if the amount per day is the same, that's almost \$20,000 spent each time we put a child in juvenile detention.

CONNECTICUT

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