Interim Report: Juvenile Justice Pre-System and Early System Youth

May 2019
Understanding Current Conditions

The Background

In August 2018, the community that comprises Colorado's 17th Judicial District commissioned The Youth Initiative of Adams County (ACYI) and Girl Effect's TEGA (Technology Enabled Girl Ambassadors) to garner youth and community voice and perspective about the current conditions of youth who are either at risk of, or are already in, the juvenile justice system in Adams and Broomfield counties. The findings of this study will support the Juvenile Justice Collaborative Action Network's (JJ CAN) decision making processes and aid in developing strategies to deliver impact for youth in the system.

TEGA is a mobile-based, peer-to-peer research methodology which uses smartphone technology to empower adolescent girls to capture girls', boys' and communities' realities in real time. The partnership between ACYI, through its national network StriveTogether, and Girl Effect established a network of 12 TEGAs in Adams County to elevate authentic youth voices and provide rich, qualitative data to inform the CAN's work. Our 12 TEGAs received training in digital interviewing, to become qualified Market Research Society (MRS) digital interviewers.

YOUTH INITIATIVE
OF ADAMS COUNTY

TEGA | Powered by Girl Effect

The Challenge

Getting into trouble with the law can impact youth at every junction of the cradle-to-career continuum, culminating in college and career choices. Juvenile delinquency correlates with drug use, gang involvement, alcohol abuse and unsafe sexual behavior. It presents challenges which reduce the safety of schools and neighborhoods, and costs large amounts of public money for law enforcement.

Using an outcomes focused approach, TEGA aimed to understand more about the current conditions and root causes of kids who enter the justice system and focused on the following objectives:

1. Bring to life the narrative/journey of youth who enter into the juvenile justice system at any point in their adolescence.
2. Understand how kids and families [can] access help, care and resources *before* entering the juvenile justice system.
3. Identify any gaps in the juvenile justice system and provide a youth-driven perspective on ways to improve it.

This interim report focuses on the first two objectives while subsequent rounds of research will address objective three.

As part of the research we interviewed both youth and adults familiar with the juvenile justice system, who either lived or worked in from Adams and Broomfield Counties, including:

59 girls and boys aged 13 to 20 years old and who fell into one of two categories:
- Pre-system – youth who were **at-risk** of entering the justice system.
- Tier 1 in-system – youth who have had **first offenses/minor crime** charges and were currently in an intervention program
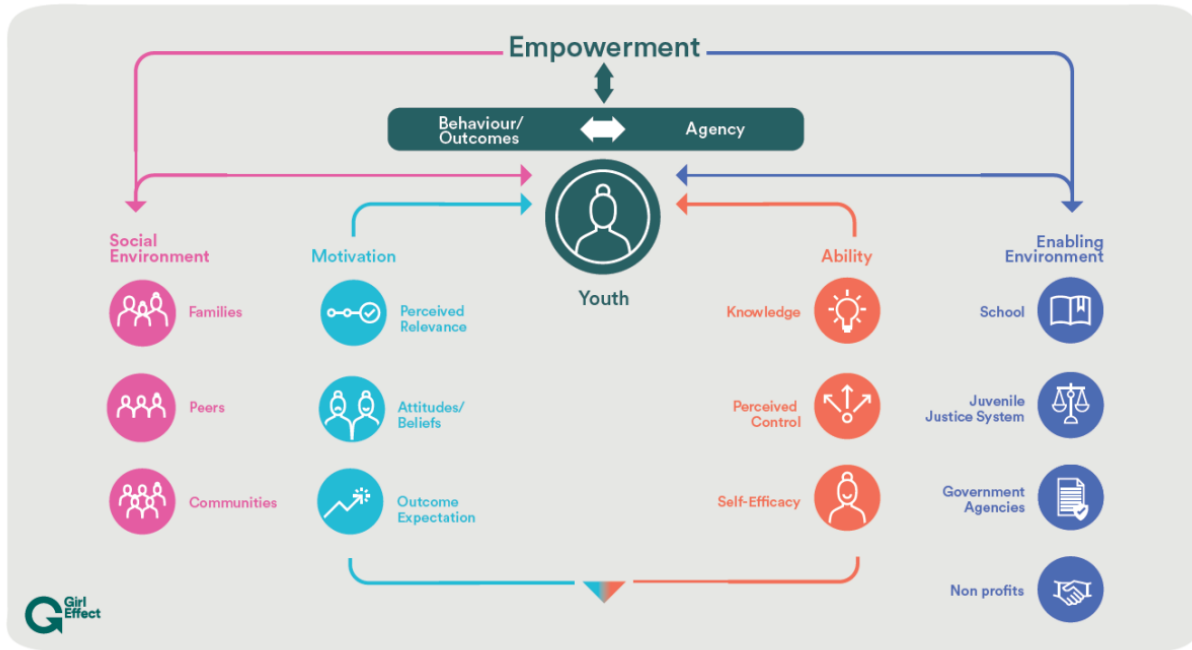
and,

19 professional adults who are the first point of contact for youth entering the system in Adams and Broomfield Counties:
- School Resource Officers (SRO): **police officers** who are employed and interact with the school systems.
- Intervention Specialists (IS): **school counsellors** and social workers who work in the school systems.
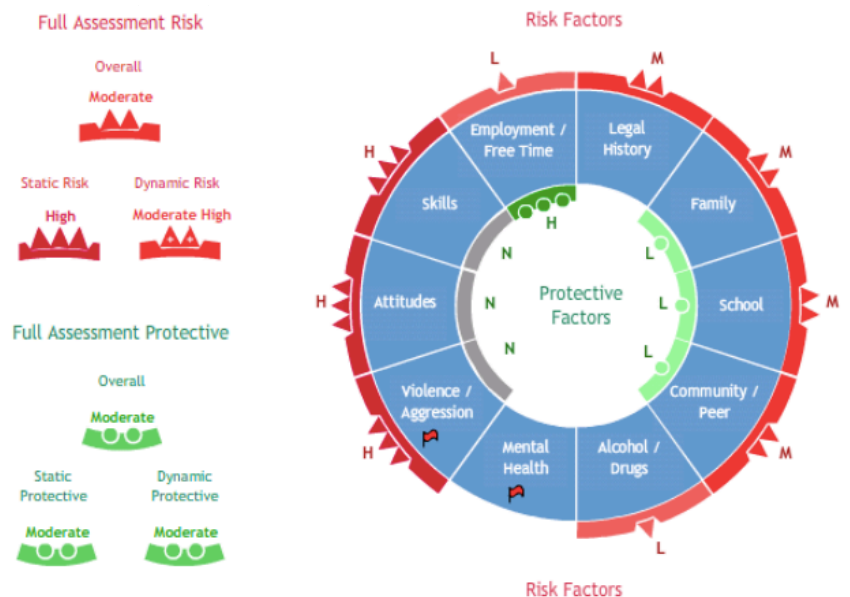
Analysis Tools

The insights contained in this summary were derived from a thematic analysis modeling Girl Effect's Theory of Change. Through this framework we were able to bring to life the journeys of these youths, to look at the holistic picture of the lives of those at risk and assess factors in their social and enabling environments that contributed to their journey. We identified six overarching themes that point to intervention opportunities that increase the youths' motivation and ability to enact change in their lives.

We also utilized the Colorado Juvenile Risk Assessment (CJRA)[1] – a state-of-the-art criminogenic risk assessment – to inform the survey design and the Youth Assessment Screening Instrument (YASI)[2] to translate the findings into a reporting framework well known across the juvenile justice sector.

YASI – Youth Assessment Screening Instrument

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[1] https://cdpsdocs.state.co.us/ccjj/Committees/JuvenileTF/Handout/RiskAssessment/02-CJRA_Prescreen_Risk_Assessment.pdf
[2] http://orbispartners.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/YASI-Brochure.pdf

The Overarching Insights

Six main themes were identified across both youth and adult samples. These insights highlight key aspects of pre-system and in-system youths' lives.

	Pre-System and In-System Youth	Intervention Specialists and School Resource Officers
Shared core set of values	A majority of these **youth see themselves as good kids with ambitions.** They have a shared core set of values that they subscribe to and demand from others including respect, non-judgmental, independence and freedom, family and friends and personal success.	The professionals in this study also emphasized two of these values – **respect and non-judgmental** – as key behaviors they should demonstrate when engaging with youth, showing some **alignment** of with the youths' values.
Criminal labels	They believe that **a negative mark on their record perpetuates future negative outcomes** and interactions with adults, thereby reducing their motivation for change.	IS and SROs acknowledged the **benefits of restorative justice** and talked about the programs and strategies that help **remove criminal records**.
Role models	The **impossible seems possible for those youth who engaged with an experienced role model**, one who could relate to their story and provide a positive perspective on their future outcome.	The importance of role models is known by these professionals and many are working or looking for ways to **integrate more role models into the youth's lives**.
Conflict management skills	Many youth cited **removing oneself from a conflict or a tense situation as the best way to manage disagreements.** Their enabling environments however, often prevent them from walking away, resulting in confrontation.	IS and SRO seem very aware of the youths' need to **develop their coping skills** and communication abilities. Some mentioned tools they use with students to help improve social emotional skills and **awareness of mental states**.
Knowledge of the world	There is an elevated belief that **school lacks content that will prepare them for 'real' life.** Many want to learn life skills, have access to supportive resources, and gain a better understanding of their lived environments.	These professionals want to see youth **grow and develop**, but, like the students, are worried that students are not getting the **skills they need for the real world**.
Rules and Laws	School rules are generally viewed as positive, however the consequences, particularly **out of school consequences, are perceived as ineffective** and further perpetuate negative outcomes.	IS and SROs agree that **some of the rules are largely ineffective** because they **do not address root problems or help change** the problem, but they brought a nuanced understanding of why rules are needed in the first place.

Environmental Factors

In order to understand how to support these youth and their families in accessing help prior to getting into trouble, our analysis sought to understand the reality that frames their decisions and actions. Three environments were identified as highly influential:

Social

School

Juvenile Justice System

Social Environment

Youths' experiences highlighted **family and home life**, and especially siblings, as determining factors in their ability and motivation to engage with or avoid contact with the justice system. While family relationships may be complicated, they are still one of the most important parts of youths' lives.

The **quality and stability of home life** was highly influential. Youths' narratives demonstrate a wide range of household make-up and many who do live in 'non-traditional' households explained that this situation was the result of unstable and traumatic home lives. Furthermore, more than half of the youth indicated that they have moved at least once in the past five years. Most youth value **stability, parental supervision, guidance, and support**. Some recognize having responsibilities at home is a part of growing up.

62%
Of these youth have moved at least once in the past five years

Youth have a range of ways to talk about ways to remove themselves from conflict:

- Walking away
- Going on a walk
- Being alone
- Eating alone
- Cooling off
- Calming down
- Going to their room
- Zoning out
- Playing a video game
- Putting in headphones
- Keeping their distance
- Giving someone space

In situations where parents aren't around, or in a state of conflict, the **family relationship can be a source of trauma**. When conflict arises youth usually cope with the situation in one of two ways, they **either talk it out with the family or remove themselves** from the situation. IS and SROs teach youth different tools to help them recognize and mediate troublesome emotions in tense situations.

Youth specifically spoke about the **role their siblings play in shaping their own outcomes**. Siblings can sometimes serve as a gateway into the justice system. Other times they provide much needed help with navigating stresses and/or traumatic homelife. Equally, seeing a family member or another significant person succeed is **key to them visualizing their own success**.

"I started to see how my mom was treating me and how she just kept being herself and she started to change. So, then I looked at her and then I looked at myself and I was like, "No, I need to change," so then I changed so now I'm not really becoming a bad influence because I don't do the stupid stuff that I did do before."

- Pre-System, Girl, age 15

A parent's or guardian's **view of the school system and the intervention efforts impacts the efficacy** of professionals within it. IS and SROs want to be aligned with parents and provide them **training and resources** because it supports their intervention methods. IS and SRO identified other challenges in a youth's home life - homelessness, affordable housing, and poverty – as key issues that make it difficult for a youth to break the cycle of troublesome behavior.

"When you don't see eye to eye with the parents [...] you can only do so much with youth when you have them for two-hour programs. And then they go home, and it's up to the parents on how they want to parent their kids. So, I really think it's just trying to get the parents on the same page and really trying to kind of coach the parents through what we're trying to work with them on too."

- SRO, White, F, 1-4 years

In addition to family and homelife, a youth's **friends and peers** are highly important people in their lives, but also can be troublemakers who encourage criminal and risky behavior.

Friends become a kind of family, an infrastructure and boundary some youth recognize as necessary to ensuring positive peer influence. But sometimes youth **succumb to situations**, finding themselves reconciling their actions in order to protect their friendships.

Youth indicate that risky friendships look like:

- The inability to abandon negative friends in distress
- A sense of importance to show solidarity
- Lack of control in the name of 'fun'
- Provocation through physical force or calling names
- School – the accessibility of negative peers
- Peers who ask for money and favors

School Environment

Youth stories about their experiences illustrated how **school systems** are integrated in the juvenile justice system and how they act as entry points into the pipeline. However, this environment can provide vital supports as well.

The majority of students feel that **social life** is the main reason to come to school. A few mentioned it was also a way for them to get away from a disruptive home life. But, socialization at school isn't limited to peers; many feel **friendships with teachers are just as important**.

"Somethings that I like about school is that mostly all the teachers help you on your work and they explain everything to you and sometimes they can help you with issues that you have at home."
- Early In-System, Boy, age 15

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"One example is that a teacher told me that I should leave the school because I was a piece of shit and all that."
- Early In-System, Boy, age 15

"Something I like about school is all the different kinds of people because like I used to have relationships with many, many different kinds of people, and it's a whole different environment. You know, it's like a safe place. I'd rather be at school, you know."
- Pre-System, Girl, age 15

Teachers who provide **words of affirmation** and positive reinforcement motivated students to be more **engaged in school and in their futures**. Youth really appreciate it when their teachers go out of their way to connect with their students.

However, many youths also mention **teachers who exacerbate the situation**. Even students who have favorite teachers can still identify other teachers, staff and/or administration who seem to be 'out to get them.' Teachers, staff, and administrators who are perceived as overly judgmental and lacking respect for students contribute to a youth's disengagement with school.

When youth are uninterested or disengaged in class, a high school diploma becomes a means to an end rather than an opportunity. Students share a belief that school **"doesn't teach us anything we want to know."** They feel that classes do not relate to their life, stating they **"never teach us about ourselves"** or about **"real life skills."** Youths, IS, and SROs all feel that schools need to do a better job educating student about "how the world works" including paying taxes and bills, computer skills, technology, civics and criminal justice classes.

Unfortunately, many youths feel their **future is predetermined** because school staff have already placed a label on them for previous infractions: **the 'bad kid' label**. Youth who are disengaged feel that this label narrows their future outcomes so that their only options are college or jail. Youth and adults in this study both

"If you mess up once, they'll think you're habitual... and group you in with the bad kids."
- Pre-System, Girl, age 16

place high value on restorative justice practices because it frees youth from a predetermined future and allows more agency in choices.

Youth, for the most part, do see themselves as either a good student or talk about their capacity to be a good student. Many recognized that their **ability to be a good student varied** based on the day or their life circumstances. While most think they are good students, many youths have experienced trouble at school, and some have been held back.

Youth believe **school rules** about fighting, drugs, and safety **'mostly' make sense** because these actions are not appropriate for a school environment. However, disciplinary actions like expulsion and out of school suspension are perceived as ineffective. IS and SRO also shared this belief. Both youth and adults explain that these forms of discipline do nothing to change the **underlying problems** causing the behavior.

"I think expulsion and suspension is kind of stupid. Like, a kid doesn't want to go to school anyways."
  - Early In-System, Girl, age 14

"When kids are doing really bad at school and we kind of kick them out or coach them out, or we're just like, "this isn't the right setting; you should go somewhere else," most of the time they don't go anywhere else and they just drop out."
  IS, White, F, >8 years

Juvenile Justice System Environment

Youth spoke of both positive and negative experiences with the **juvenile justice system**. They feel that it is possible to become trapped in the system which is also why restorative justice programs are so important.

Overall, a lot of kids felt that the **laws are 'good' and 'reasonable.'** They don't see the policy or laws as the problem but rather believe that prevention methods are lacking because kids still get in trouble even though they know better.

When youth get in trouble, they clearly **recognize the reasons 'why'** and also **know the benefits of staying out of trouble**. Many feel remorse for their actions, especially when the repercussions affect their family. At the same time, very few youths appear to take ownership of their actions and say it was their friends.'

Some youth believe you can get **caught up in the [court] system**, similarly to how the 'bad kid label' happens in schools. Contrary to these narratives, youth who have been given the opportunity to clear their record or maintain a clean record say **'second chances' are very important** and very appreciated. IS and SRO also feel **restorative justice programs are highly effective.** The majority of youth who have had direct interactions with cops or the other parts of the justice system say that their **experiences have been overall positive**.

Most of the youths' **understanding of the criminal justice system** was gained through informal conversations, not structured education about the system. Formal knowledge tends to come after a youth has had direct experience with Juvenile Justice system, as such **youths who have had minimal contact with the system desired a better understanding and classes on the subject.**

"[Diversion] did take a lot of my time and my resources and some money but it has helped me. In the future I don't know what I'm going to go do. I don't know if I'm going to be a senator or something ... but if I had a felony, I'd have no chances of even doing that..."
  - Early In-System, Boy, age 15

Other Enabling Environments

In addition to the above enabling environments which the youth spoke about, IS and SRO also identified three other enabling environments: **Technology, Cultural Differences, and the Government,** as environments that make a profound impact on the efficacy of the intervention methods they use.

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IS and SRO saw tech and social media as one of the biggest issues Generation Z faces

Both IS and SRO felt that **social media and technology** was damaging to students' communication and social skills, their ability to regulate emotions, or real world skills. Although technology was presented as the main concern, their larger concern was the impact tech has and their own lack of understanding of modern tech and its uses.

Cultural differences were debated along gender and ethnic lines and identified as a challenge by IS and SRO. Adults felt that certain cultural differences can make particular groups of youth and families more challenging to work with. For example, working with Latinx/immigrant populations is difficult, even for those who come from the same background.

> *"Our Mexican immigrant families that are here get really proud, like culturally really proud, like, 'no, we don't need help; no, we're good on clothes,' or 'we're good on supplies.' ... I think that's a cultural pride, but I also think it's a response to our society right now, and maybe a resistance to getting documented somewhere, or involved in some kind of system that could have negative implications against their ability to be here."*
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> *- IS, Woman, 5-8 years*

Governmental treatment and experiences influence the way families react to interventions and supports offered by professionals. SRO and IS perceive that those who experience the government as a threat, such as undocumented families, seem more resistant to help. However, those who already get support from government services, such as social security, are more open to receiving help from these professionals who work with their children.

Caregiver burnout due to high staff turnover, high caseloads, and lack of resources was a concern of many professionals. This burnout can make it difficult to approach each and every youth with a 'blank slate' or to always maintain a positive attitude, which reduces job efficacy and damages the possibility of building positive relationships with the youth in need. Professionals said this is especially problematic because building relationships is a key component of their job

> *"You get burnt out, but trying to just push that aside, and when that person's sitting in front of you, this is a new person, and this person comes with their set of baggage, and I don't know what that it is, so I'm not gonna judge them on it right away."*
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> *- IS, Woman, 1-4 years*

Recommendations / Actions

This interim report brings to life the narrative and the journey of youth who enter into the juvenile justice system through descriptions of their social and enabling environments. The six overarching insights offers initial areas of opportunities to help kids and families get access help, care and resources before making contact with the juvenile justice system.

To begin to address the third objective – identifying gaps in the juvenile justice system and provide a youth-driven perspective on ways to improve it – we discovered some initial points of improvement from Phase One of research.

When authority figures share the youths' values and beliefs and find ways to relate to them, youths are more likely to listen and be respectful back.

When youths feel that they have been able to change the way a teacher or authority figure feels about them, they are more motivated to do well and apply themselves to their work and lives.

When youths build a relationship with someone who has successfully left a traumatic situation, broke the cycle of their criminal behavior, and/or pursued a fulfilling career, they are more likely to believe it is obtainable.

When classes are perceived as applicable to their ambitions and teach relevant information such as "how the world works," youth are more motivated to apply themselves in school.

When consequences and rules are informed by the youths' values and the root causes of behavior, they may be more likely to "buy-in" and be receptive to the interventions.

When youth are encouraged to use and access emotion-regulating strategies and coping skills that they are familiar with (e.g. walking away from situation) they can better process the situation and think logically about the potential outcomes.

While these points of improvement are based on rigorous research and analysis, they are not yet informed by the total spectrum of youth in the school to prison pipeline.

Nest Steps

Our next step is to engage in Phase Two fieldwork with high risk and post-system youth, to garner their perspective on the most effective inventions for youth further in the juvenile justice system.

The complete continuum of voices of the youth impacted by the school-to-prison pipeline will help to identify protective and risk factors for Broomfield and Adams County youth. The next phase of research will also validate the identified opportunities for intervention and improvement discovered in Phase One. The JJ CAN is utilizing findings from Phase One to inform the design of Phase Two research. For more information and to hear of our initial insights contact ACYI's Community Engagement Director Jody Nowicki at jody.nowicki@acyi.org.