

Juvenile Justice Needs Assessment – Ventura County

Presented to the State Advisory Committee on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

The purpose of this report is to outline what we heard from Ventura County youth and to present their thoughts and insights, specific to the programs and resources they felt would help them be successful. In collecting this information, we found that the path to justice involvement was the result of multiple risk factors. Many of the youth interviewed did not have a father figure in their homes. One youth said, “I didn’t feel loved in my home so I tried to find it elsewhere”, and we found most youth agreed. Drug use/abuse played a part in nearly all of the arrests, as did family disruptions and negative peer pressure. In addition, youth indicated that Ventura County has a lot of gang activity and that drugs are easily accessible. Consequently, youth need programs and support, provided simultaneously, from several sources; i.e., counseling services to address mental wellness concerns, drug/alcohol treatment, educational assistance, life/social skills, employability assistance and resources to assist families in need.

City Impact, Inc. explored the needs of Justice-Involved Youth in three unique ways.

1. We conducted four focus groups at Ventura County Juvenile Facility and gathered feedback from youth ages 14 to 20. We asked questions related to their backgrounds, what lead to their choices and ultimate arrest, what programs/resources they felt would benefit them once released, and what programs/services would help youth not make the choices they made. We talked with 26 youth: Gender: Male (19), Female (7); Ethnicity: Latino/a (24), Caucasian (1), Multi-Ethnic (1); Ages: 17 and under (20), 18 and over (6), 100% were justice involved youth.
2. An on-line Juvenile Justice Youth Needs Survey was utilized to gather information from youth on probation who participate in programs at the Ventura County Evening Reporting Centers and from youth enrolled in Transformation Works – Ventura County (TW-VC) a case management program for justice involved youth and youth at high-risk for justice involvement. 71 surveys were completed: Gender: Male (55), Female (16); Ethnicity: Latino/a (48), Caucasian (11), African American (10), and Pacific Islander (2); Age: 17 and under (29), 18 and over (42), 72% were either past or present justice involved youth.
3. City Impact conducted individual interviews with youth enrolled in TW-VC. 26 youth were interviewed: Gender: Male (11), Female (15), Ethnicity: Latino/a (25), African American (1), Age: 17 and under (6), 18 and over (20), 100% were past or present justice involved youth.

Ventura County’s Needs Assessment looked at what youth felt they needed from an intervention perspective; but also, from a prevention viewpoint. We asked questions about personal need factors and then asked what services / resources would help address those concerns. An overwhelming majority of youth indicated a need for a positive person in their life. One youth, when asked “What do you think would have prevented YOU from doing the activity(ies) that got you arrested” indicated “Have a mentor close that would’ve looked out for me and guided me to the right path”. And, another youth stated, “someone who knows me well, but also tells me what I am doing wrong”. Assistance from a Mentor or a Case Manager was a consistent theme, whether the youth were talking about what prevention or intervention programs would help and/or could help youth be successful.

Information from the four Focus Groups at the Juvenile Facility (JF)

In talking with the youth we found many of them struggled with the same issues and concerns, i.e., drug use/abuse, parents struggling with their own mental wellness, lack of a positive role model, need for attention and boredom. During our group sessions we asked, “What, if anything, do you think would have prevented you from getting in trouble?” The answers were as simple as “just stayed home”, or “not hanging out with the wrong people”, but also included “Stayed Sober” (this was mentioned numerous times), “more coping skills”, a job, having a Mentor and After-School Programs.

This led to conversations about specific programs or resources they felt would benefit them now. Many responses revolved around needing someone to talk to and assistance with personal goals. Specific suggestions for intervention programs and support included:

- **Drug / Alcohol Programs** - Many of the youth struggle with addiction, and they know that for them to be successful, and not re-offend, there needs to be effective Drug and Alcohol programs/classes. They mentioned programs that followed the Palmer Drug Abuse Program (PDAP) or Alcohol & Drug Program (ADP) model were beneficial. They indicated that the Drug/Alcohol Program should address “drugs but also my lifestyle”. One youth mentioned that prior placement she did drugs “to ease my emotional pain”, others in the session understood. There was a lot of discussion about their anxiety with maintaining sobriety; and they understand that sobriety is necessary for them to stay out of the justice system.
- **Individual Counseling** - There was a consensus throughout all four groups that they wanted/needed one person they could talk to and “to ask for help that won’t judge” me. They mentioned having a therapist or counselor to talk to would help them be “less annoyed”, have more coping skills, and help them not “be angry at the world”.
- **Group Therapeutic Sessions** - For the younger girls (14 to 16), they wanted a *Girls Group* that would help them work through their struggles. In addition, some youth felt it was hard to control their anger. They indicated Anger Management and Social Skills Classes would be beneficial and address their need for better coping skills when they find it “hard to control my anger” and to help them “make better choices”.

When asked, “What changes need to be made to improve the overall well-being of justice involved youth?” many youth indicated the importance of drug and alcohol programs, mentoring and/or case management and counseling as programs would be beneficial.

In talking with the youth about Re-Entry Programs, most youth mentioned they would need help/assistance to be successful and to reduce the chances of re-offending. Re-Entry Programs they would participate in included:

- **Residential Drug Treatment Programs** - Several youth felt they needed a safe place to continue their recovery process. For many youth, going home means going back to an environment that may not be supportive of their desire for sobriety. During one group a youth shared “I smoked with my dad and thought it was cool-I wanted to be like my dad”, she was eight when she started using. Another youth said he worried about “drug use continuing when I’m released”.
- **Drug / Alcohol Programs** - for youth who did not want/need a Residential Drug Treatment Program, they wanted a program that provided therapy, guidance, and support as they continue with the struggles of sobriety.
- **Mentor or Case Management Programs** - 25 of the 26 youth we talked to at the Juvenile Facility felt that having a Mentor or Case Manager, as part of a Re-Entry Program, would be beneficial. For youth 14 to 17 they wanted a mentor or case manager who would provide Life Skills that would “SHOW me what to do – not just tell

me what to do". Specifically they wanted help getting back in school and with graduation requirements, assistance with getting their Driver's License or opening a bank account and, finding a job, and help with resources for their family.

However, for youth 18 and over, they wanted a mentor that would help them with "independent living skills". They wanted help finding a place to live, finding a job, assistance with enrollment in credit recovery classes, help with parenting skills, and enrollment in vocational/trade classes. In addition, older youth mentioned that programs that have individuals who have "been in trouble" talk to younger youth, would be beneficial because "you can't understand - until you live it".

For both age groups, they felt the consistent relationship of a Mentor or Case Manager would give them "extra help by ONE person", and that would help them be successful.

- **Educational Assistance** - Most of the youth indicated that school was hard and Tutoring, Homework Help and/or Credit Recovery programs would be beneficial.
- **Employment Assistance** - When asked what programs / service would be beneficial post-release older youth wanted help obtaining a job. Most felt that a job would help their families, give them something to do with their free time and keep them from re-offending.
- **Individual and Group Counseling Services** - younger youth (14 to 17) believed Individual therapeutic services and Group Counseling Programs need to continue post release

During the Focus Groups, we wanted to hear what the youth thought would be effective Prevention Programs. We asked them what would prevent youth, in a similar situation, from going down the path that lead to their arrest. The Prevention Programs they felt would help youth avoid delinquent behavior and avoid the juvenile justice system included:

- Drug and Alcohol Use and Abuse classes
- Anger Management Classes
- Individual Therapy
- After School Programs including sports, tutoring assistance, vocational training, life skills classes and credit recovery programs
- Work Readiness Programs that assist youth look for and obtain employment

We asked each group "Would certain media campaigns be helpful?" and 97% felt media campaigns would not have deterred them from making the choices they made, nor would deter other youth in a similar situation. A few youth believed, "Actually it could influence in the opposite direction". Two youth felt the use of TikTok could help, but only if the spokesperson looked like them and was believable.

Information from the On-Line Surveys

The On-Line Survey gathered information from youth who participate in programs at Ventura County Evening Reporting Centers (ERC) as well as youth enrolled in TW-VC.

Responses to questions from the On-Line Survey were similar to those provided by youth at the Juvenile Facility. When asked, "What resources do you need so you won't get re-arrested?" 25% stated they needed a safe place to live/stay. They also indicated:

- Employment Assistance (37.5%)
- Mental Health Services (25%)
- Educational Assistance - help getting back in school and tutoring (25%)
- Drug / Alcohol Program (12.5%)
- Vocational Training (12.5%)

When asked what types of community programs they have participated in, they mentioned:

- After-School Programs (57%)
- Mentorship Programs (21%)
- Drug / Alcohol Programs (14%)
- Job Training Programs (14%)
- Community-Based Programs (9%)

Then we asked, “Did the programs help?” and 93% indicated the program did help. Responses included:

- Yes, it’s taught me the negative effects of drugs and alcohol and kept me from doing them (ERC - Boys & Girls Club of Greater Oxnard and Port Hueneme)
- Yes, they helped a lot on homework and getting ready for the future of education (ERC - Boys & Girls Club of Greater Oxnard and Port Hueneme)
- Yes, the program helped me a lot. I’m finally able to get my high school diploma and I’m finally able to get a better job (TW-VC Program)
- Yes, the family resources helped me be in a safe place (TW-VC Program)
- Yes, I was able to get and maintain a job (Youth Empowerment Program)

We asked, “What could be done to help other youth not become involved with illegal activities?” they indicated:

- After-School Programs / Sports
- Mentoring / Case Management Services
- Therapy - one youth said “Lots of Therapy”
- A few youth mentioned having guest speakers talk to youth could help. One youth said, “Maybe by telling them how it can affect others and themselves if they do something illegal.”

Information from Individual Interviews

We conducted Individual Interviews with youth enrolled in Transformation Works – Ventura County, a case management program for justice-involved youth and youth at risk of justice involvement. We asked the same questions as those asked during the Juvenile Facility Focus Groups. When we asked these youth, “What do you struggle with on a daily or weekly basis?” Many of the youth mentioned mental health, depression and anxiety; one youth said, “I don’t want to go back to the old me.” Another said, “I hated my life back then and that keeps me motivated.” When asked about specific programs or resources they felt would benefit them now; responses included the need to talk to someone and assistance with personal goals. Specifics included:

- **Case Management Programs** - they indicated the need for someone to talk to when “my family is busy and sometimes it’s hard to talk to them”; they “know about resources that are available” and they will “help walk through life skills”. One youth said, “I wish I would have met my case manager sooner.”
- **Mental Health Programs** - Individual Counseling and Anger Management Classes
- **After School Programs** - specifically tutoring and sports programs
- **Job Readiness Programs and Vocational Training**

When we asked, “What, if anything, do you think would have prevented you from getting in trouble?” the responses included having a job, going to school, but most mentioned, “If I had more support”.

The overall results from all the findings showed a common theme. Our youth are struggling and what emerged is the need for individualized services. We found that justice-involved youth have an array of need factors, and a multi-program approach is what's needed to improve the overall well-being of each youth. To summarize, we found the following programs would build on individual strengths, not punish for past mistakes, and offer alternatives to detention. These programs can / should be part of a successful Re-entry, Intervention and/or Prevention Plan:

- **Drug / Alcohol Programs** - Both outpatient and Residential Treatment Homes. For youth who know that going home will jeopardize their sobriety; there is a critical need for in-patient treatment centers.
- **Case Management and/or Mentoring Programs** - There was a consistent theme that they need someone to guide and assist them through this time in their life. For many, they cannot go to their parents, but they want the ONE person they can turn to for help. Within this program employment assistance, resource management, and life skills can be addressed
- **Therapeutic Services** - This includes individual counseling services but also Groups for Anger Management, Drug/Alcohol, and Social Skills
- **After-School Programs** - This can include homework assistance/tutoring, credit-recovery programs, sports and vocational/skills training

During our groups at the Juvenile Facility, and when we conducted the individual interviews, we ended with this question; "Is there anything else you would like to share with us that we haven't already talked about?" We received a response that surprised us: "No, just that the questions made me think of the old me a lot - and in a way it is embarrassing to remember how I was. But, I am proud of where I am now." With the right programs, services and guidance, maybe more youth can be proud of where they are now!

The need for collaboration and cross communication between agencies and community-based organizations will be vital for justice-involved youth to be successful. It is our hope that the information gathered from the Ventura County Needs Assessment will assist the SACJJDP as you develop the 3-year State Plan for 2021-23.