



What Do YOUNG Think?

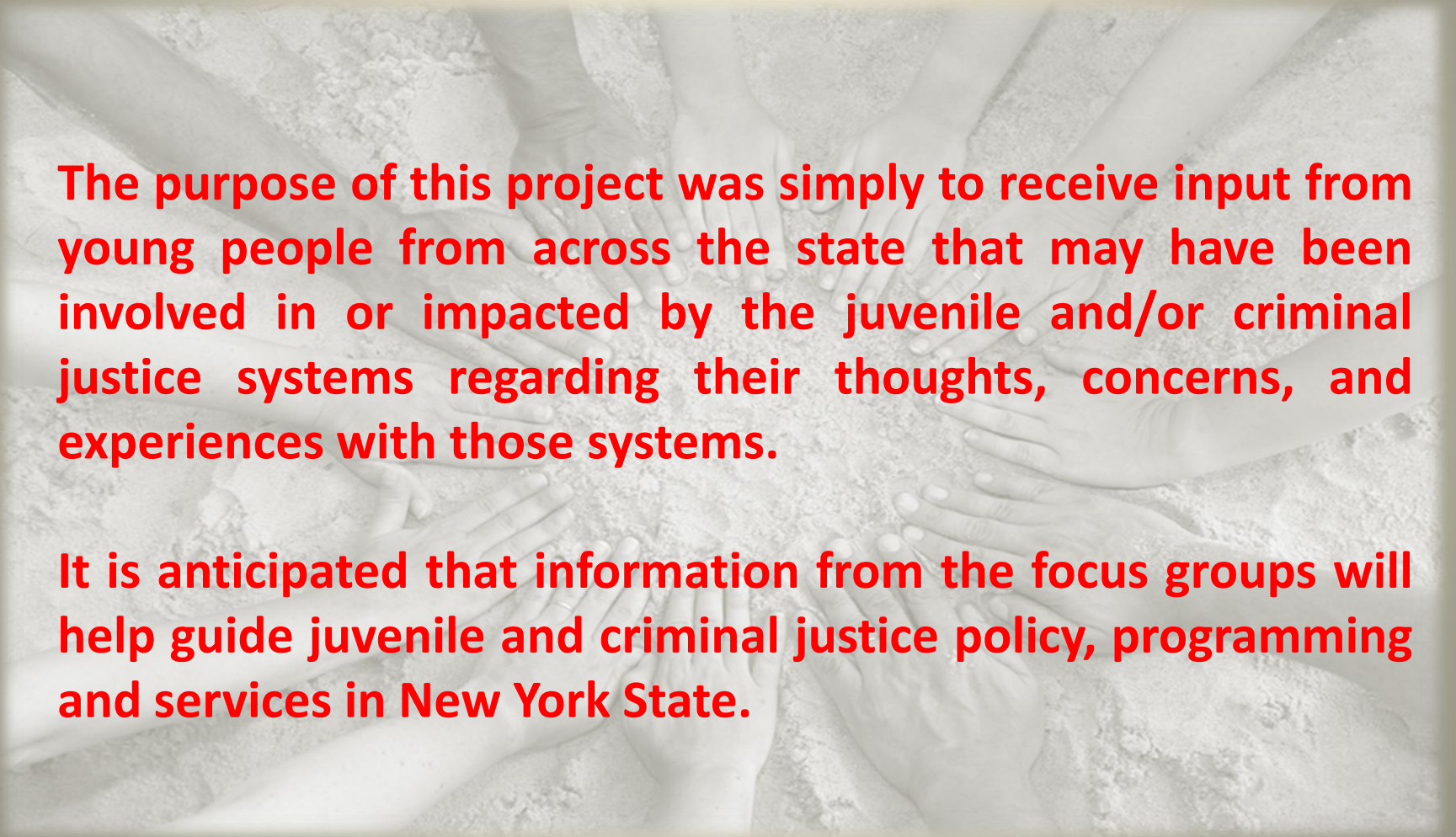
(about the juvenile and criminal justice systems)

A Youth Focus Group Project

of the New York State Division of Criminal Justice
Juvenile Justice Policy Unit/DMC Initiative

Summer 2009

Purpose of Focus Group Project



The purpose of this project was simply to receive input from young people from across the state that may have been involved in or impacted by the juvenile and/or criminal justice systems regarding their thoughts, concerns, and experiences with those systems.

It is anticipated that information from the focus groups will help guide juvenile and criminal justice policy, programming and services in New York State.

Focus Group Facilitators: Who were they?

•NYS DCJS Staff

Courtney Ramirez, DMC Coordinator

•Master's Level Student Interns

Julia Lee

Amy Starkman

Allen Wong

•Trained Community “Experts”

Dayshean McMullen

Elmer Blanco

Herman Turner

Isaias Garcia

John Daye

John Parsinnen

La Shonda Sullivan

Loreina Brown

Santana Knighton

Syeda Jannat

Talisha Dexter

Dalesa Vitalis*



Focus Group Process

Reach
out to
youth
serving
agencies

Identify
potential
facilitators

Conduct
facilitator
training
session

Facilitate
focus
groups

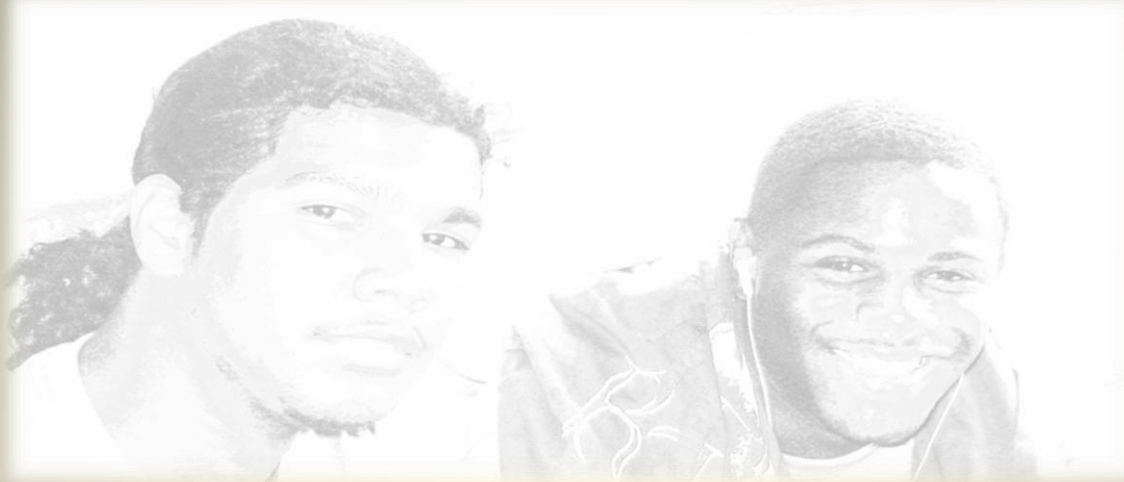
Transcribe
notes and
prepare
summaries

Coordinate
facilitator
debriefing

Develop
"talking
points"
and
reports

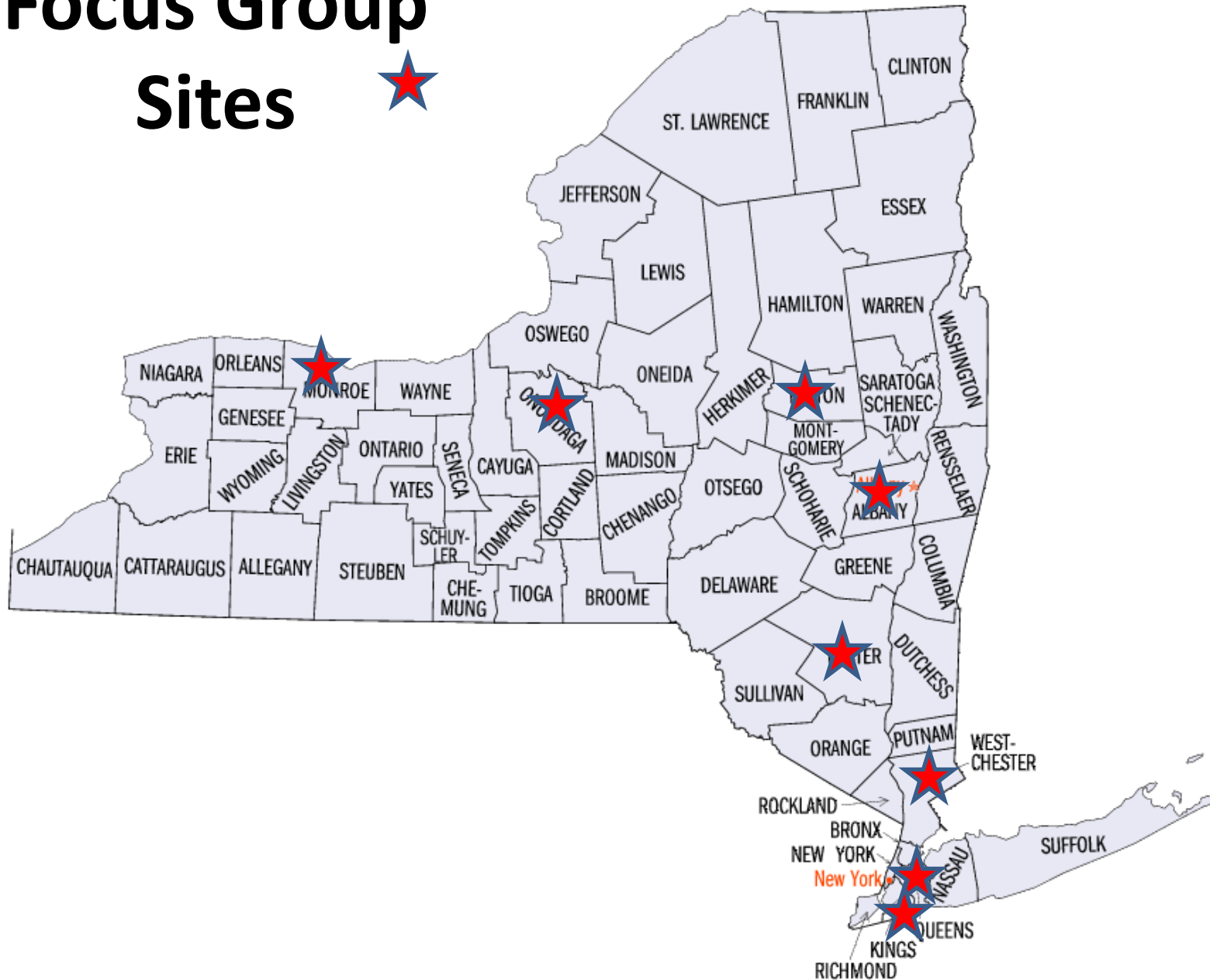
Present
information
to interested
parties

Who were the community experts?



- Eleven young adults, between the ages of 16 and 25
- Representing Syracuse, Yonkers, New York City and the Capital District (Albany area).
- 91 % (10/11) are members of racial/ethnic minorities
- 7 have been arrested in the past: 5 as “juveniles”; 4 as “adults”
 - 2 have been held in juvenile detention; 1 has been in a juvenile facility
 - 1 has been in an adult prison (and has successfully completed parole)
- 6 (55%) have had either a parent or other loved one who has been incarcerated
- 7 (64%) are currently employed; 6 (55 %) are in school - 4/6 are in college

Focus Group Sites

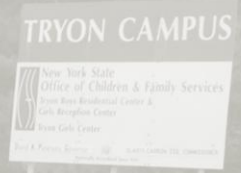


Where we went:



**Woodstock
Youth Anger
Management Group**

**Trinity Institution-
Homer Perkins Center
in Albany**



**Tryon Boys & Girls
Facilities in Johnstown**

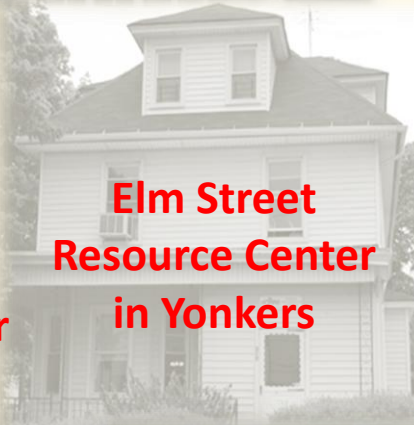
**Westhab, Inc. -Peak Center
in Mt. Vernon**



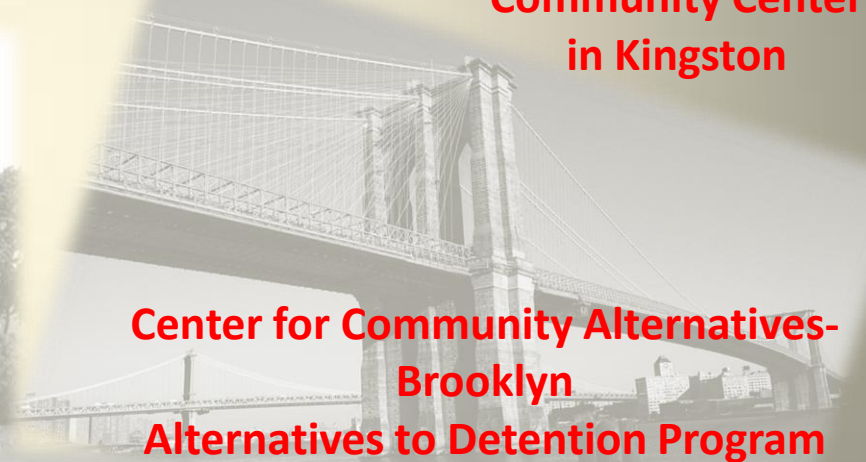
**Everett Hodge
Community Center
in Kingston**



**Hillbrook Detention Center
in Syracuse**



**Elm Street
Resource Center
in Yonkers**



**Center for Community Alternatives-
Brooklyn
Alternatives to Detention Program**



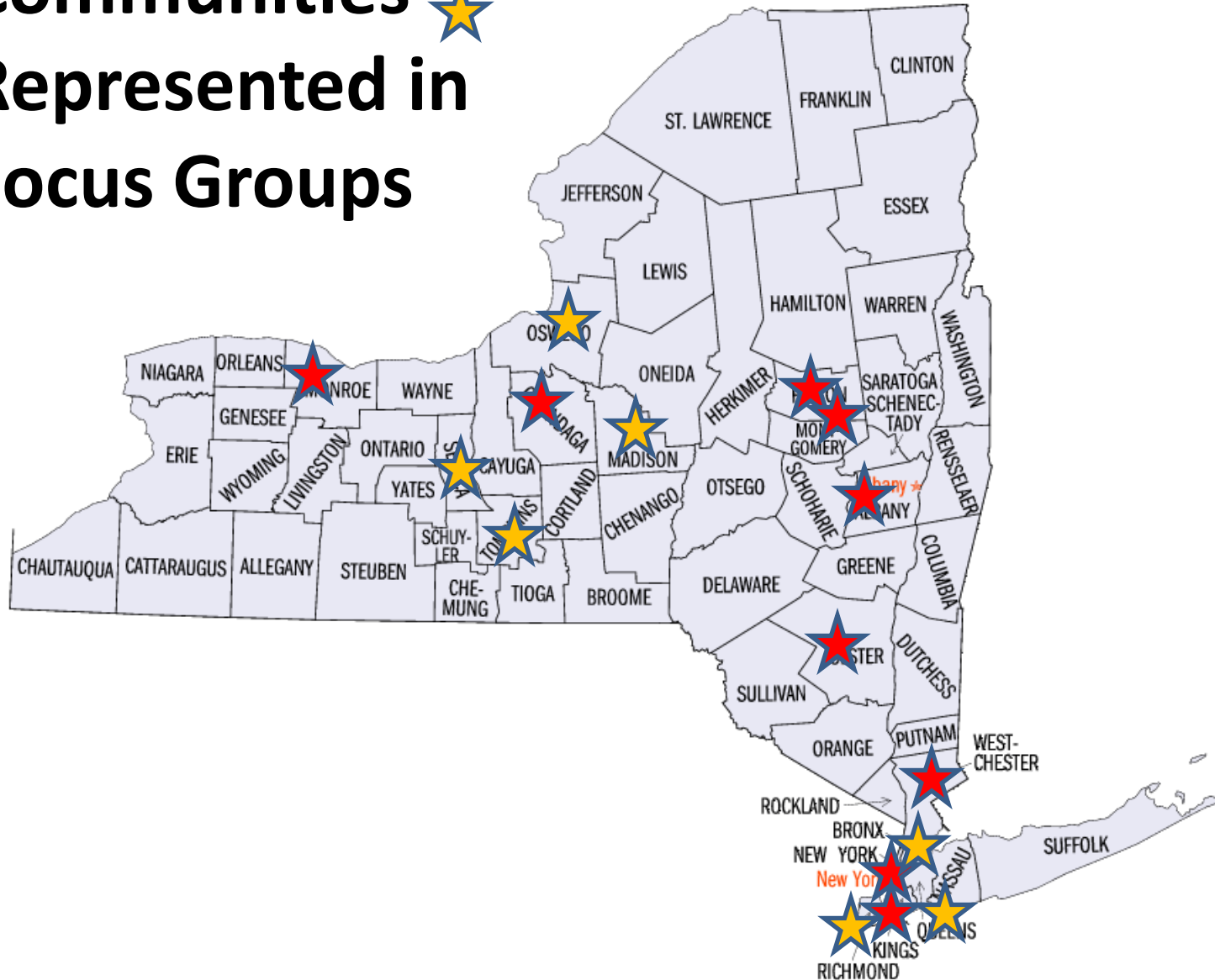
**Dunlevy Milbank Center
Aftercare Program in Harlem**



**Children's Defense Fund
Summer Leadership
Program**

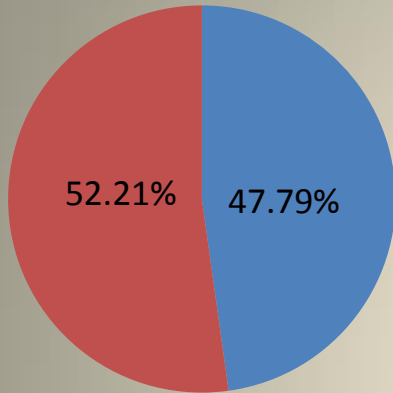


Communities Represented in Focus Groups

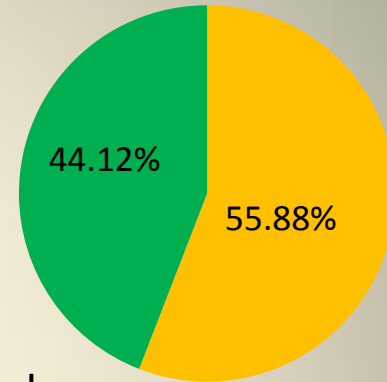


Who did we talk to ?

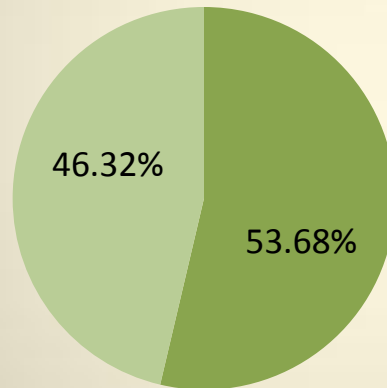
147 young people between the ages of 11 and 22



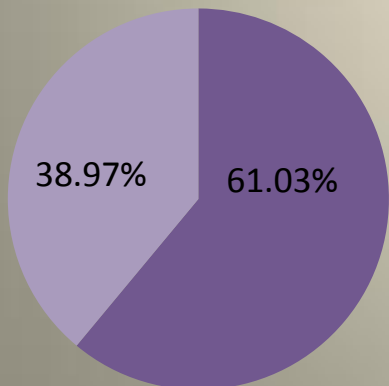
Male
Female



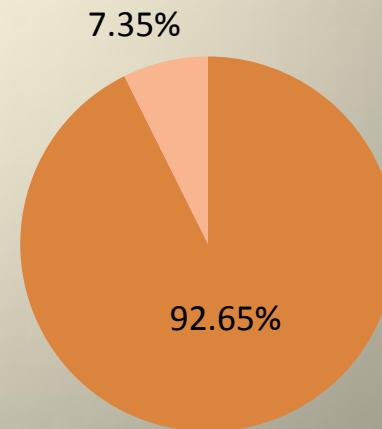
Arrested
Never Arrested



Incarcerated parent
No Incarcerated parent

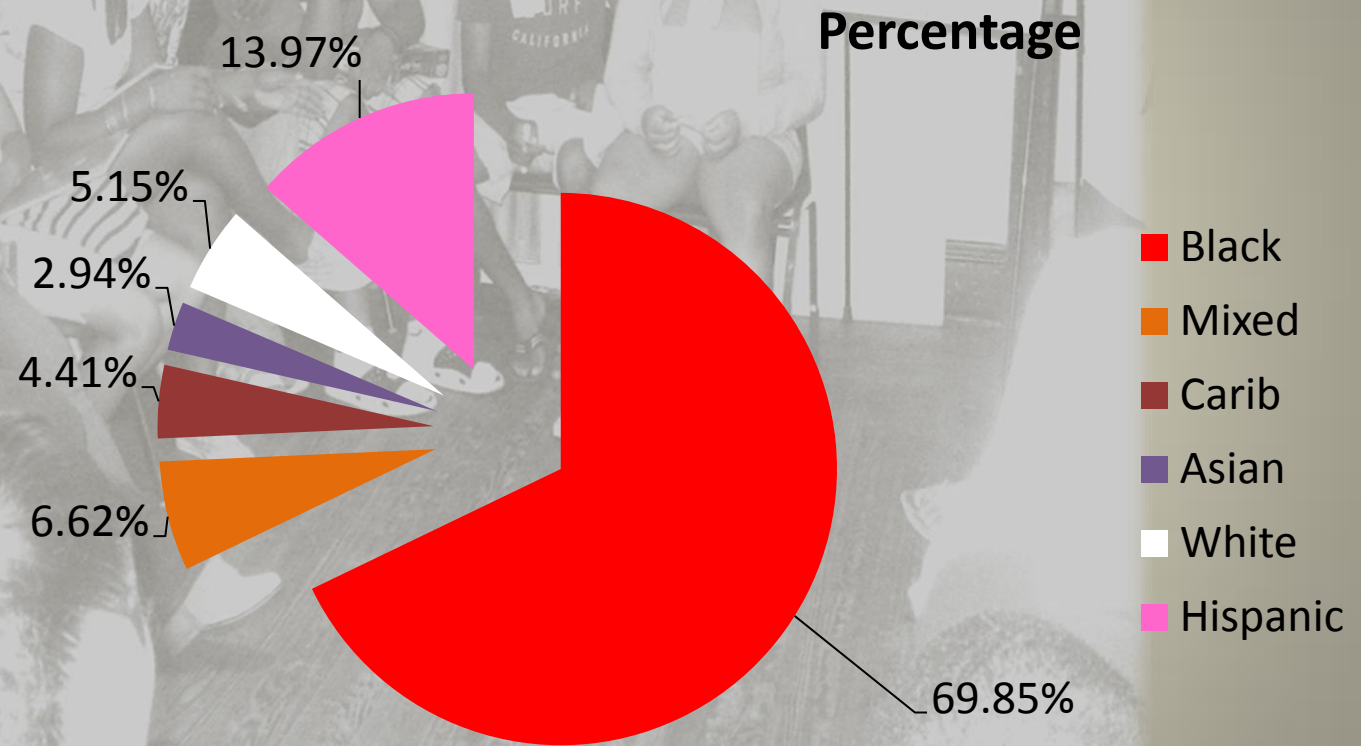


Summer Job
No Summer Job



In School
Not in School

Race/Ethnicity of Focus Group Participants



We asked youth 3 main questions:

(and a lot of follow-up questions)

•The Juvenile Justice System: What's it all about?

Who does it involve? Who does it impact?

What is a “juvenile”? What's the difference between the juvenile justice system and the adult criminal justice system?

•What kinds of crimes are young people arrested for?

Why do young people commit crimes?

Why arrest young people? Who gets arrested?

Where do young people get arrested?

Are there things that young people shouldn't be arrested for?

Why do so many young people get re-arrested?

•Does “the system” work?

What are your experiences with the system?

What is the purpose of incarceration?

Are there things that should be changed?

If you were...(in charge) what would you do differently?

Juvenile Justice System:

What's it all about?

(according to focus group participants)

- Crime
- Arrests
- Courts
- ATD Programs
- Detention Facilities
- Probation
- Placement
- Aftercare

- Young people
- Parents & other family members
- Police officers
- Lawyers
- Judges
- Social workers
- Probation officers
- Facility Staff

COMMUNITIES

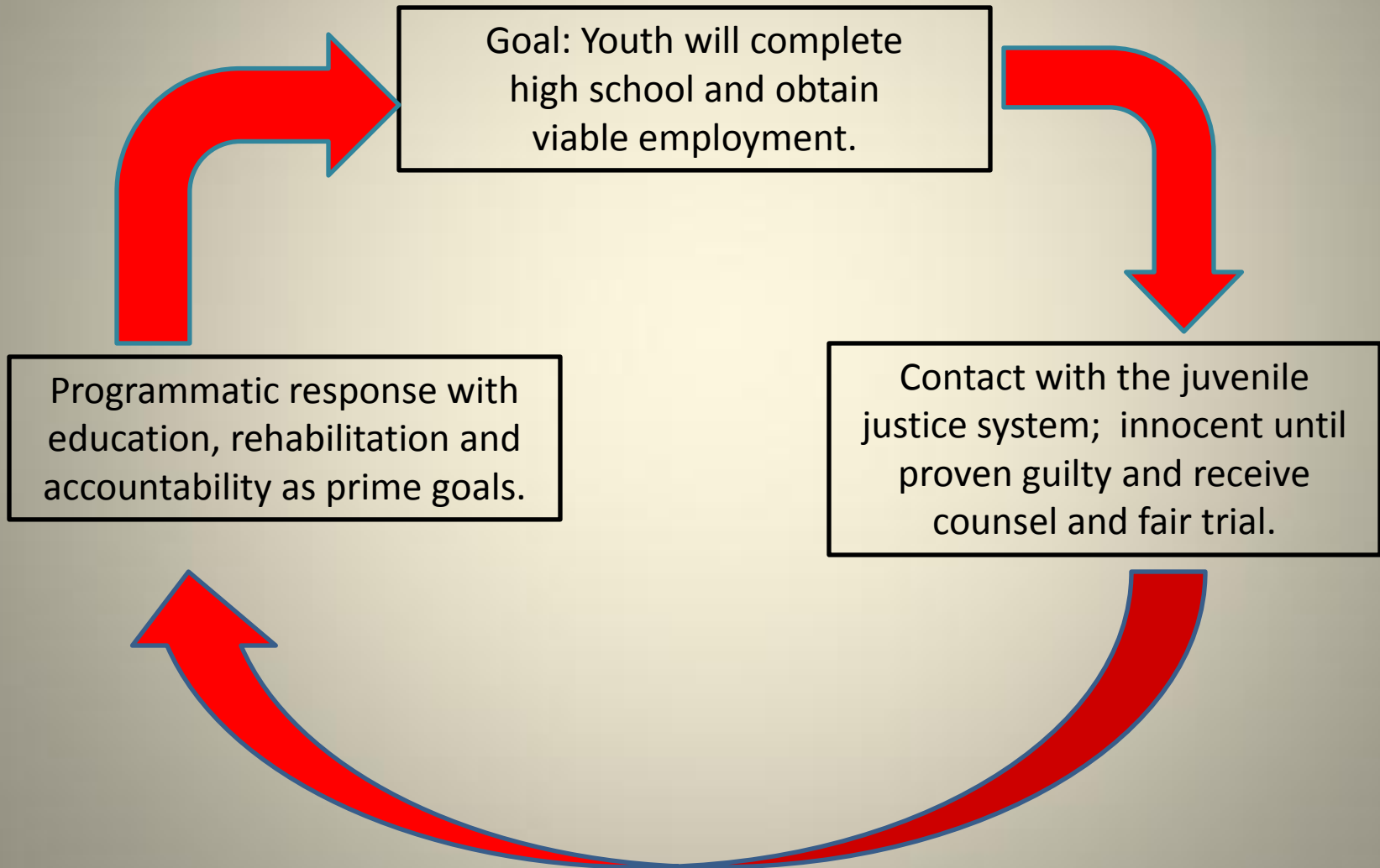
What kinds of crimes are young people arrested for?



- **Fighting**
- **Graffiti**
- **Shoplifting**
- **Stealing**
- **Drugs**
- **Gangs**
- **Weapons**
- **Violation of Probation**

How the system should work

(according to focus group participants)



Schools arrest you for things that should be dealt with by the school, not the juvenile justice system

We are labeled as "bad" and "gang members" because of how we dress and the color of our skin

No investment made in schools or prevention programs

We are punished because our parents have issues

Goal: Youth will complete high school and obtain viable employment.

Programmatic response with education, rehabilitation and accountability as prime goals.

Contact with the juvenile justice system; innocent until proven guilty and receive counsel and fair trial.

On track for High School/GED completion and/or viable employment.

Programmatic response with education, rehabilitation and accountability as prime goals.

Contact with the juvenile justice system; innocent until proven guilty and receive counsel and fair trial.

Court times and probation meetings are during school hours, so we miss classes

The time between court dates is ridiculous

There's a lot of hypocrisy - can't sign a permission slip for myself, but can convicted as an adult

Do not really get a chance to talk to the judge

We are given bad lawyers who treat us like an assembly line

On track for High School/GED completion and/or viable employment.

Programmatic response with education, rehabilitation and accountability as prime goals.

Contact with the juvenile justice system; innocent until proven guilty and receive counsel and fair trial.

Inconsistent rules and unfair treatment

Seems like "the system" is about job security

Low quality academic programming

Facilities are too far away from home (don't allow families to "heal" the way they need to)

Outcomes

(according to focus group participants)

Contact with the juvenile justice system; was innocent until proven guilty and received counsel and fair trial.

Current processes get too many people into the system that don't really need to be there.

Programmatic response with education, rehabilitation and accountability as prime goals.

Locking a young person up makes them feel like an animal

Some young people have even more distrust of adults and believe no one cares about them

The system exacerbates the problems and crime isn't reduced

And in their answers they asked:



- “Why don’t people try to understand why we do the things we do?”

- “If people really wanted to impact juvenile crime why don’t they do it like this?”

Why We Do What We Do: Neighborhood Problems

- **Extreme poverty**
- **Violence**
- **Over-Incarceration**
- **Easy access to drugs**
- **Access to weapons**

“What do you expect- it’s the ghetto?”

Why We Do What We Do:

Lack of Resources

- Need money for basics
- Can't afford to go to school
- Need protection

**“Being in the streets,
that’s the only answer
we got right now.”**

Why We Do What We Do: Personal Pain

Many young people have suffered a lot of trauma and have issues that haven't been addressed – angry at the world and feel all alone.

- **Neglect/child abuse**
- **Grief and loss issues**
- **Drug Abuse**
- **Incarcerated family members**

“I think that deep down inside they think that we aren't gonna make it.”



Why We Do What We Do: Limited Options

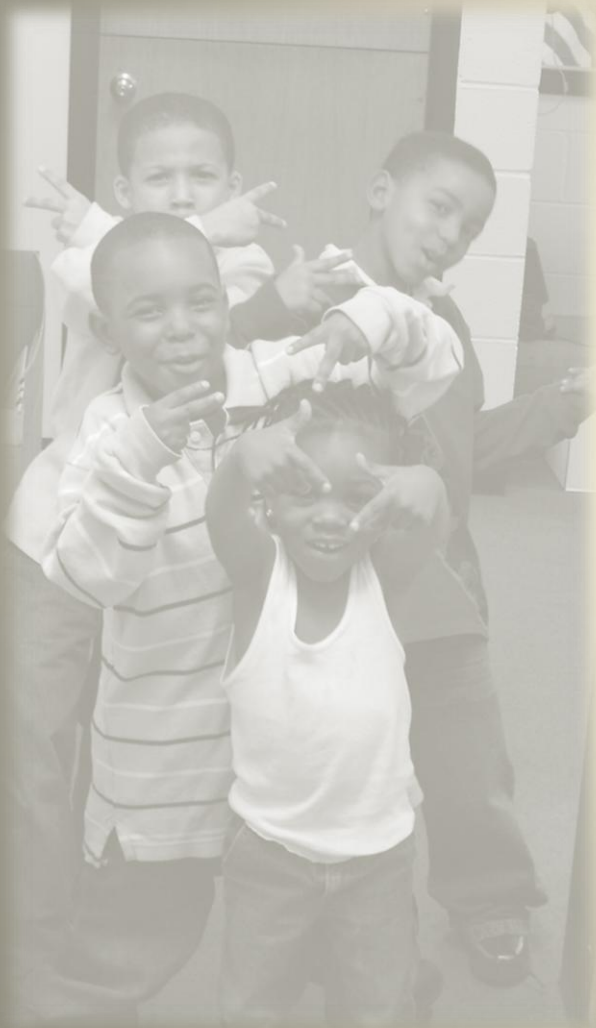
- Few positive role models
- Low expectations
- Negativity is the “norm”
- Haven’t seen real alternatives
- No fear of death because there is “nothing to live for”
- No hope for the future

“We are set up to fail and nobody really cares.”



Why We Do What We Do: Understanding “Gang” Involvement

- “Gangs” look very different in different parts of the state-
- Grown up with family members in gangs
- Young people who don’t feel loved, safe, or provided for by their families look for the support in peers
- It’s about relationships, feeling of belonging – not criminal activity
- Just wanna “fit in” somewhere
- Gangs are glamorized in the media- seen as “cool”



“If people really wanted to impact juvenile crime why don’t they do it like this?”

Need to level the “playing field”

- Regular access to computers; Field trips outside of the neighborhood; Creative Arts
- Educational supports; Positive mentors; Counseling
- Offer year-round employment opportunities
- Provide better training for “legal aid lawyers”
- Invest in improving police-community relations

Why don't you do it like this?

- Invest in kids before they “go wrong”
- Develop more “Second-Chance” Programs
- Educate community about how system works
- Involve parents and families in interventions
- Make facilities less like jails
- Create *real* partnerships between organizations
- Utilize more staff who have “experience” with the system and are committed to rehabilitation and change
- Get regular input from young people

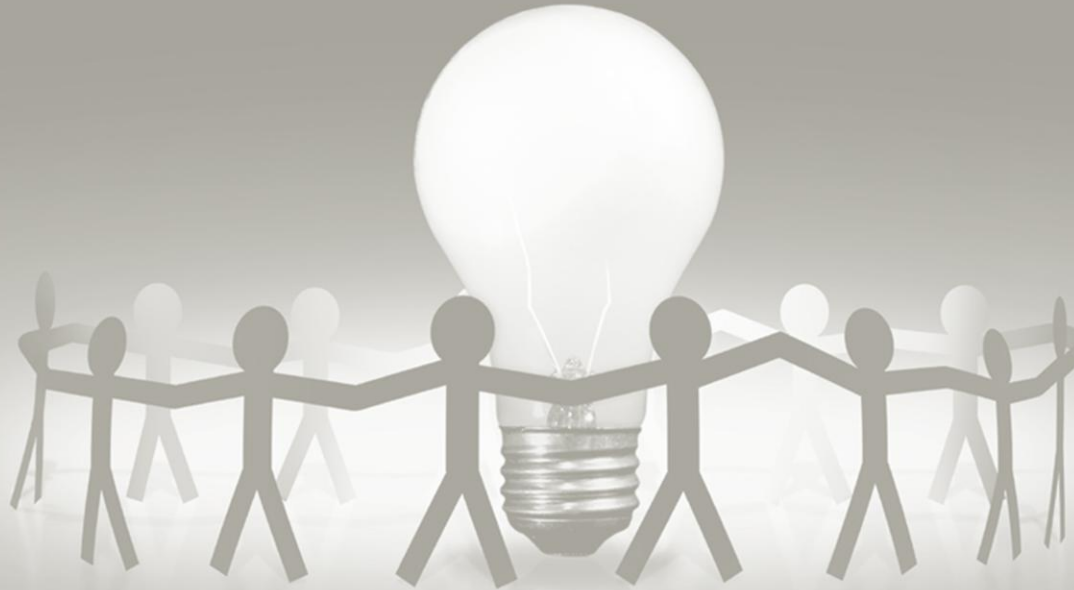
Think outside the box!

Thinking outside of the box

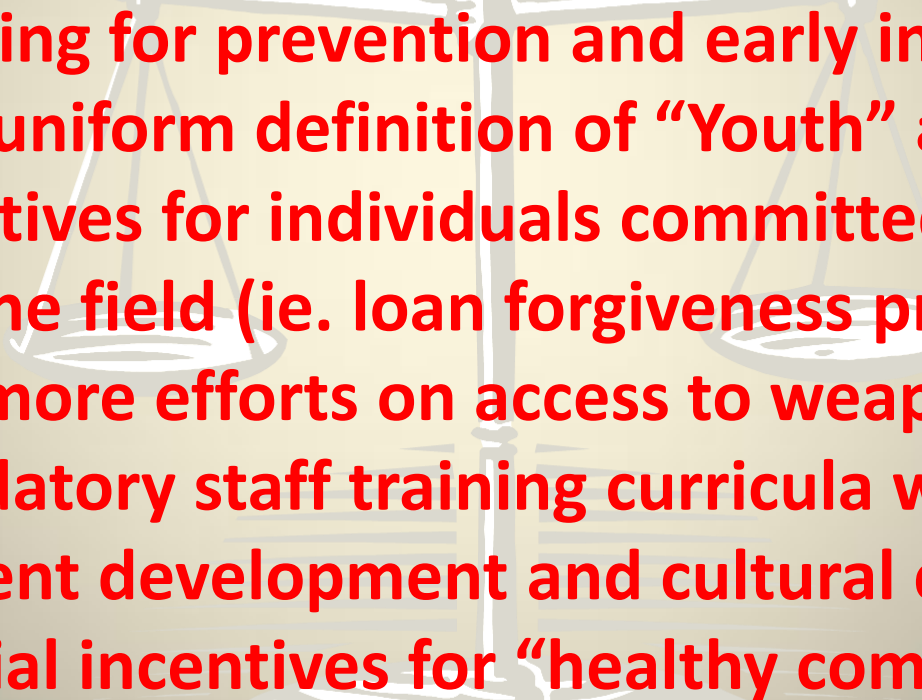
- Conduct evening family court sessions
- Develop school-based employment programs
- Create “Get Ready for Court” workshops
- Treat “juveniles” as if they were your own kids
- Utilize young people meaningful roles and leadership positions



**Although it was hard for some to imagine...
we asked them what things they would change
if they were responsible for the system.**



“If I were a law maker and I could change one thing I would...”

- 
- Increase funding for prevention and early intervention**
 - Implement a uniform definition of “Youth” across systems**
 - Provide incentives for individuals committed to working within the field (ie. loan forgiveness programs)**
 - Concentrate more efforts on access to weapons issues**
 - Require mandatory staff training curricula which include adolescent development and cultural competence**
 - Create financial incentives for “healthy communities”**

Next Steps

???

- Create a feeder system for JJAG
- Develop Youth Advisory Committee
- Expand role of facilitators
- Continue to facilitate groups in facilities