

Date: July 19, 2021, 2:15pm

Location: Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center

Participants: 7 young men, with varying lengths of stays; self-identified race: majority African-American, also included white & Latino

Facilitator: Dani Soto, PhD, Impact Justice

At the request of Interim Chief Probation Officer, Marcus Dawal, Dr. Dani Soto facilitated a focus group with seven young men confined to Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center (JJC). The purpose of this focus group was to hear directly from the youth regarding their experiences at the JJC and suggestions that they have.

Although youth participants did pinpoint specific issues germane to Alameda County, much of what they shared regarding challenges, concerns and recommendations are supported by other research and reports.

Staffing challenges in the County:

- Most, but not all, of the young men said there's staff they can talk to/relate to; however, they also noted inconsistencies in the ways staff implemented and enforced rules. For example,
 - I know if it's going to be a good day or a bad day based on which staff are on duty
 - Staff breaks mean programming is interrupted for lockdown
 - Older staff means we'll be spending more time in our rooms - "they put you in early & take you out late" - referring to staff breaks
 - Lots of staff inconsistent in coming to work on their shifts; understaffing impacts what we're allowed to do
 - Some staff "hard-ass"; some "power-tripping" - just want to "regulate people and have control issues"
 - Some new staff is "trying too hard" - "they'll roast us, but we get tagged if we say stuff back"
- **Recommendations from youth:** Have more staff on duty so lockdowns aren't required; don't require lockdowns for staff breaks; don't hire any former police officers; hire more women staff

Programming

Youth indicated that programming was not really helpful. They also expressed the desire to have more choice over the programming they participate in. They expressed a preference for programming conducted by outside, non JJC staff.

- Most programs are "weak-ass"; is a joke - many programs consist only of worksheets or "games" like word searches, etc.
- Too much focus on self-improvement
- Liked the music program

- **Recommendation from youth:** expand the music program; provide more opportunities to make & record music
- o Entertainment options are very limited
 - Most entertainment preloaded on tablets
 - Movies changed monthly
 - Only have access to PG-13 movies
 - **Recommendation from youth:** Movie options updated more frequently; access to R rated movies at age 18
 - Music is pre-loaded & they're not allowed to download their own music
 - **Recommendation from youth:** Allow watching YouTube, using music apps & loading own music, watching movies, etc.
- o Don't want programming 7 days/week & want more options to choose
 - **Recommendation from youth:** have weekends off; want more free time during the week as well
- o All expressed liking the outside (non-staff) instructors for programs
 - **Recommendation from youth:** bring in more outside instructors; would like Independent Living Skills to be run by outside instructors
- o Vocational Training requests:
 - Resume, interviewing, & other job seeking skills
 - Welding & construction
 - Carpentry
 - Finance & investment classes
- o Recreation:
 - Access to the full gym depends on the behavior of the whole unit
 - One person can "screw it up for all of us"
 - **Recommendation from youth:** Weights & pull up bars in the unit; full courts in the units or don't restrict access to the gym
- o Policy Change Recommendations
 - Allow later curfews
 - Want to be treated more like adults

Facilities

- o Make the space as comfortable as possible
 - No over-crowding
- o Separate out youth by age/maturity level
- o Need access to a commissary
 - Currently limits on how much you can buy of an item - don't want restrictions
- o Food quality & amount is inadequate
 - Commissary is supplementing food provided by JJC
 - Youth report being hungry "all the time"; portions not big enough
 - Quality of food is "gross"; don't want pre-packaged food
 - Food offered together as a meal is often odd &/or unappealing/unappetizing
 - Example: Served pancakes and Doritos
 - Access to microwaves depends on staff & what they feel like

- **Recommendation for youth:** Food should be cooked by grandmas; food should have to be eaten by staff too; should have access to a kitchen so they can cook their own food; food options & limitations at the commissary should be expanded; should be able to buy “real” food from Doordash & other delivery services
- o Personal Items
 - Want to bring in a pair of shoes
 - Want to be able to wear jewelry
- o Want “real” toilet paper
- o Want access to shower whenever they want
- o Want a better barber
- o Want new beds/mattresses
- o Want TVs & power outlets in rooms

Family Engagement/Connections

- o Visiting area is crowded & not private at all
- o Visits are too short
- o No food - only vending machines
- o Currently video calls are monitored
- o Visits from girlfriends (non family members) currently has to be approved by PO
- o Would like a trailer for access to conjugal visits & overnight visits with family/kids

Recommendations: Would love table games to play - also including kid games for siblings; allow families to bring in food; longer visits, at least 3 hours & allow for even longer visits on the weekends; want to be able to make unrestricted video calls through the tablets; should allow any visitor over the age of 18 (specifically around girlfriends);

Interactions/Relationships/Discipline

- o Room confinement is over-used, especially around fights/arguments between youth
 - “Let us work it out”; Don’t punish for the whole day, just enough time to “cool off”
- o Currently get points for good behavior
 - But the store where they can spend points is too expensive & has restrictions on number of items you can buy

Reentry Needs

- o Need gate money - there’s currently none
 - Money they had on them is confiscated during arrest & not given back
- o Access to jobs that make “real money”
- o Need driver’s licence
- o Probation officers
 - Not consistent; don’t come when they say they will
 - Shouldn’t be able to assign programs that we don’t agree to

Overall Emotional/Psychological Impacts of being in JJC shared:

- Emotional/Psychological Impacts
 - Depressing
 - Angering
 - Uncertainty
 - Lack of dignity