



THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON YOUTH JUSTICE SERVICE PROVIDERS AND THE NYC YOUTH THEY SERVE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on communities of color and people who are incarcerated, including youth involved in the justice system, in detention and placement in NYC. Service providers who have been on the front lines of the pandemic response working with justice-system-involved youth have a keen insight on the impact of this crisis and offer urgent guidance as we begin this new year. This research brief outlines central issues and recommendations that service providers identified in a recent survey conducted by [The Youth Justice Research Collaborative](#) of 31 service organizations that work with young people who are impacted by the legal system.

IMPACTS OF COVID 19

Service providers emphasized that their young clients who were impacted by the criminal justice system *before* the pandemic had lives filled with the immense challenges, vulnerabilities and inequalities produced by poverty, structural racism, contacts with the legal system and many other forms of dispossession. The pandemic exacerbated their precarious conditions, putting them and their families in even more serious jeopardy. Service providers described to us the vulnerabilities that young people faced and continue to face with COVID, which we have categorized as: fundamental instability, including housing and food insecurity, health risks, mental health concerns, and the technology gap.

While the providers we surveyed rose to the historical moment, continued their necessary supports, and persevered, even with limited staff and funds, it often wasn't enough. COVID interrupted their services and there is ongoing concern that this disruption will continue long into the future. This research brief outlines some of the ways, despite extraordinary efforts, that COVID impacted the supports provided by service providers in the areas of education, programs and services, and in detention and courts. In each of these areas, young people have faced tremendous and lasting challenges from COVID. This brief suggests that substantial future investment is required to make things better.

PROVIDER RECOMMENDATIONS

The providers who answered our survey highlighted that the needs of young people impacted by NYC's Legal system are not incremental but large and fundamental. They expressed the need to:

- **PRIORITIZE ACCESS TO STRUCTURAL EQUALITY FOR JUSTICE INVOLVED YOUTH:** Service providers expressed great concern over the wellbeing of their young clients and frequently raised the urgency of addressing the severe structural inequality in employment, financial assistance, housing, food, health, and technology that will only grow with this next wave of COVID infections.
- **INVEST IN YOUTH OF COLOR WHO HAVE BEEN IMPACTED BY THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM:** Service providers are calling for a renewed and full investment in the needs of young people, in the programs, supports, advocacy, education and activities that hold and enrich their lives.
- **END TO HARM PRODUCED BY THE CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES:** Service providers emphasized that the pandemic has only further entrenched the vulnerability, risk and harm young people face when exposed to carceral institutions. They are calling for a range of immediate reforms and radical transformations to improve the conditions of the criminal legal system for youth.

LEVERAGING RAISE THE AGE

The precariousness of the pandemic highlighted how older youth in the adult system, especially those held in secure detention or on Rikers Island, faced heightened risks and limited supports that younger adolescents did not face in the juvenile system, in part, because of Raise the Age reforms. Raise the Age was a significant piece of legislation that has subsequently demonstrated real harm reduction but, as COVID revealed, it remains insufficient. Yet, within the context of this historical moment, perhaps the drops in detention and policies moving more adolescents away from Adult Court under Raise the Age has paved the way to substantially reconsider incarcerating youth - all youth. Service providers recognized this opportunity as well.

REDUCING THE HARM OF COVID POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the important insights provided to us by service providers, the Youth Justice Research Collaborative (YJRC) calls for immediate action to reduce the harmful impact of COVID-19 on NYC youth involved in the justice system. We offer the following critical policy solutions.

- **Protect Essential Services and Supports for Vulnerable and Justice-Involved Youth.** We call on policymakers to reject cuts and commit to a just budget that is not balanced on the backs of vulnerable and justice-involved youth.
- **Restore Services and Programs to Youth in Juvenile Detention and Those Held on Rikers Island as Soon as Possible.** As soon as it is safe to do so, in-person programming and services must return to juvenile and adult facilities.
- **End Detention for Youth and Increase Avenues for Release.** We must sustain the urgency around keeping more youth in the community with the supports they need.
- **Invest in Youth-Serving Community-Based Organizations During the COVID Crisis and Recovery.** In the face of the large-scale disruption, loss of life, and economic depression,

youth-serving organizations require more resources and capacity than they had before the pandemic began.

- **Develop Accessible Youth Training and Employment Strategies as Part of State and City COVID Recovery Planning.** The city and state must center young people in their COVID-response plans by establishing dedicated economic recovery programs that offer vulnerable and justice-involved youth education- and career-related supports.
- **Expand Emergency Access to Technology and Financial Supports for Youth.** Youth and their families need immediate access to technology and related supports, as well as cash assistance to address food insecurity, housing and other basic needs.
- **Work Toward Legal System Reforms.** There is much more to do legislatively to remove more adolescents and young adults from the punitive adult criminal justice system. We are calling for New York to expand the Youth Offender (YO) protections to those who are 25 or younger and to end prosecution of young children, who are better served through services and supports outside the legal system, by raising the age of Juvenile Delinquency to age 12.
