



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

January 2021

"Many of our kids are homeless right now during the health crisis. So, I fear for their lives."

"Many of my clients are having a hard time buying food."

"A lot of my kids will lose their homes, or get into trouble because they need money."

"Everything we were doing on March 9th had to change on March 10th."

Following the death of George Floyd at the hands of police in Minneapolis, summer protests – often led by Black and Latinx youth – filled the streets of New York City with people calling for an end to police brutality and racism. These protests followed months of disruption, as the March stay-at-home orders issued in response to COVID-19 resulted in economic stress, educational obstacles, and social isolation. COVID-19 has disproportionately affected communities of color and people who are incarcerated, especially youth involved in the justice system, including those in detention and placement in NYC. Organizations working with justice-system-involved youth have a keen insight on this moment and offer urgent guidance as we approach the year ahead.

Service providers were on the front lines of the pandemic response last spring and continue to be so now. Those working with NYC youth involved with the justice system have a unique and grounded perspective on how this crisis impacted young people and will continue to impact them long into the future. In this time of great peril, including sustained uprisings naming the racial inequality of the justice system and now another wave of COVID in NYC, it is imperative to hear from service providers as policy makers consider the needs of young people and their families now.

The [Youth Justice Research Collaborative \(YJRC\)](#)¹ is a participatory action research project studying the implementation of the Raise the Age (RTA) policy in New York City. This project is a collaboration between the Public Science Project at the CUNY Graduate Center, Youth Represent, Children’s Defense Fund-NY, Citizens’ Committee for Children of New York, community members, and advocates. We decided it was necessary for our project and the future city response to understand the experiences and needs of service providers working with NYC youth impacted by the justice system.

We asked 31 service provider organizations who worked with NYC youth involved with the legal system to distribute a short open-ended survey to their employees.² We received responses from 40 individuals representing 18 separate organizations (58% of the organizations).³ Forty-eight percent of the respondents reported they worked for an organization that primarily provided support for youth in both family court and adult court, 28% mainly or only older youth in adult court, 15% mainly or only youth in family court, and 10% other, meaning they don’t primarily work with system-involved youth. Nearly all respondents characterized their organizations as providing multiple services, with reentry / after care, youth development / education, and youth organizing / advocacy being the most common.

In this research brief, we will outline the central issues that service providers identified, using their direct quotes in italics to further illustrate and deepen the reader’s understanding.⁴ The first section will describe the current and anticipated impacts of COVID on their clients and their ability to effectively serve clients. The second section describes what is needed immediately and, in the future, to mitigate the impact of COVID on their clients and their ability to effectively serve clients. We conclude with a brief reflection on the Raise the Age policy and a list of specific policy recommendations endorsed by YJRC.

HOW HAS COVID-19 IMPACTED YOU AND YOUR CLIENTS?

We asked service providers to help us understand how COVID-19 impacted the immediate needs of their clients and their ability to serve clients. We also asked service providers to describe how they anticipated their clients’ needs changing because of COVID-19 in the coming months and years and how it might change their ability to effectively serve clients. The central answers to these questions involved highlighting the structural vulnerabilities of clients as well as the impact the pandemic has had on their ability to connect, support, and advocate for

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² The survey was conducted during the spring and summer of 2020.

³ Often multiple people from a single organization responded to the survey.

⁴ We interpreted the responses through a process called thematic analysis. First, we read multiple times all the answers *within* each question to determine what central themes were present in the responses, each time noting which service providers gave replies that matched the themes. Then, we read multiples times *across* all the responses to get a sense of what themes were present in total for service providers. This iterative process stopped when we felt confident that our themes accurately represented what the service providers intended to communicate.

clients. These sections are couched in the ongoing second wave and city and state budget crisis that is placing in serious jeopardy the scope and efficacy of service provider organizations. The city needs to prioritize investing broadly in young people, especially young people of color. This includes a fully funded and resourced service provider sector to meet the increasing demand for safe, innovative, comprehensive programming.

STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITY

“COVID-19 has astronomically impacted a number of our participants in more ways than one. Many of them were already struggling pre-Coronavirus. Now they are completely out of employment, many of them on the edge of experiencing homelessness, many of them suffering from being quarantined with abusive family members and no access to healthy and safe living, etc. Ultimately our clients’ immediate needs have been drastically compromised.”

“It has definitely heightened their vulnerability. I am extremely proud of my organization for being so diligent in doing all that we can, not only for our clients but for the community in itself. We have all in some way, supported the community by volunteering to hand out food, we have purchased items to help feed or clothe our clients, we have also provided masks, gloves and hand sanitizers to our clients.”

The providers we surveyed rose to the historical moment, continued their necessary supports, persevered often with limited staff and funds and yet, it often wasn’t enough and much more will be needed moving forward. Service providers noted that their young clients *before* the pandemic had lives filled with the immense challenges, vulnerabilities and inequalities produced by poverty, structural racism, contacts with the legal system and the many other forms of dispossession. The pandemic exacerbated their precarious conditions, putting them and their families in even more serious jeopardy. In this section we will present quotes provided by the service providers to unpack four accentuated vulnerabilities that young people faced with COVID: Fundamental precarity, health risks, mental health concerns and the technology gap.

FUNDAMENTAL INSTABILITY: Service providers frequently explained that their young clients and their families were struggling with fundamental precarity. They described extreme economic hardship because of COVID due to lost jobs, getting furloughed, losing wages and the obvious difficulty of finding jobs, not only because of the pandemic but also because of their criminal record. The number and kind of jobs that these young people qualified for was limited pre-pandemic but now, given the additional challenges, some service providers saw their clients taking unsafe jobs that put them and their families at risk for COVID exposure. Young people and their families need money and steady, adequate income. The implications of this deficit, as service providers described, are significant and included food insecurity.

“Most of our clients live in households who have lost wages and/or jobs. We conducted a survey and found that well over 100 clients are experiencing economic hardship due to the crisis....We think our clients in the Bronx and Harlem will be amongst the hardest hit. We are already seeing that many of them lost jobs or have parents who lost jobs.”

“Most of them are unable to literally afford being at home -- so they need jobs but cannot get a safe job due to the coronavirus. For those who are desperate, they choose to take risky jobs despite the health risks because they cannot afford to stay at home!”

Service providers also explained that young people and their families were experiencing significant housing insecurity. They described this insecurity in several ways. As a result of COVID, the burden of rent and the threat of eviction loomed large for many then and remains only more so now. Some young people were forced into homelessness or became precariously housed due to financial loss or even the strain of living with someone with a compromised immune system. For others, it was sheltering in place that presented the most significant danger, exposing them to physical and mental abuse at home.

“Limited support services make it difficult to serve clients, especially those who experience domestic violence or violence within their homes and no place to go due to COVID. I may not be able to fully protect/support these participants as I would in the past... I most fear participants ending up without housing in an NYC housing market that is already unbelievably difficult for young adults, especially young adults with low socioeconomic status”

“The need for food and shelter has been paramount. Most of these youth were living in unstable homes prior to COVID and now the situations are worse off. Most of the youth feel trapped.”

Service providers are worried about the growing structural inequity their young clients will face due to the ongoing impact of the pandemic. They fear unemployment for the clients and their families will only worsen as the financial crisis deepens. Jobs their clients were previously qualified for, like the hospitality industry, were hit hard and may become even more scarce. This leaves young people with fewer options and those jobs that remain come with considerable risk and danger. These young people and their families need access to affordable, quality housing. Unfortunately, the financial impact of COVID will place many more young people and their families at risk for food and housing insecurity. They need financial assistance, job security and stable housing to remain safe. It is a public health issue. Service providers must learn new employment terrain to provide updated resources and programs as well as provide significant support to find and retain steady housing.

“JOB SECURITY...They need income. This is going to be the main need of theirs moving forward. Umbrella needs may be housing support and legal support for those who were unable to pay rent and may face eviction.”

“The majority of my clients had jobs in hospitality and are now out of employment due to COVID. These clients were already of low SES and lack of income puts them at greater risk.”

HEALTH RISKS: Service providers reported that among their clients there was widespread illness including family, friends and neighbors that too often resulted in death. Some were immunocompromised or the people they lived with were. This created challenges for young people in terms of their living arrangements and their ability to go outside. Others did not readily have access to safe spaces or access to adequate medical care. Incarcerated youth were at the most severe risk and those who were out needed masks, sanitizer, cleaning supplies and accurate public health information. Their clients, often by necessity, were also more likely holding risky jobs that exposed them to unsafe environments.

"Many of our youth members have lost their family or friends and portray to be fine when they are not, but are not in the head space to articulate how they feel or what they need to feel 'ok'"

"A lot of my youth are scared to live in their house because they don't want to get their family sick."

The first wave of COVID also put service providers at risk. This was especially the case for those who provided in-person essential services. To make working conditions safe it required significant efforts including altering office space, social distancing practices, temperature checks, wearing masks, and enhanced cleaning. Staff schedules needed to be rearranged and those who had family members or were themselves immune compromised, were unable to continue working closely with others during this time. Despite precautions, some staff and family members still fell ill and tragically, a few of the organizations we spoke to had colleagues who passed away.

"Frontline staff deemed essential must be recognized. We had one death, many infections, despite the fear staff responded to the frontline and never stopped responding to needs on the frontline. They deserve the salary adjustments and even the death benefits and honor being rightly showered on medical professional and public first responders."

"Covid-19 has impacted my ability to serve clients. I have a compromised immune system and cannot afford to be in the community or in close contact with anyone who is riding the bus or train. Anyone can be a risk for me."

Moving forward, service providers expect the health risk for young people who are detained and incarcerated to remain severe. It is imperative that prisons and correctional facilities do more to keep their occupants safe as well as their visiting family and advocates. Service providers also expect that their clients will need a variety of supports to keep themselves, their family and community safe. When considering how to maintain a safe and healthy work environment for staff and visitors, service providers expect the need to rearrange space, have fewer people in the offices, hold smaller groups, meet less often in person, and have essential health items on hand such as masks and other personal protective equipment.

"Our office will likely never operate the same. We will have less participants in the office at the same time, and therefore our groups and other programming may change into smaller cohorts"

"City and or other government funds are needed to ensure the healthy operations of our organization. Safety elements such as alcohol, masks, sanitizing wipes for our offices are also desperately needed."

MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS: Service providers described deep concern for their young clients who struggled mentally and emotionally from the conditions of COVID that intensified their vulnerabilities in an oppressive system. Many were impacted directly by sickness, lost loved ones or were close to loss in their community. The continued stress of getting sick as well as job, housing and financial insecurity weighed heavily on their clients. The trauma was especially present for those young people detained or incarcerated. Service providers described their clients feeling despair, fear, isolation and losing hope during the first wave of the pandemic. Some clients needed hospitalization due to mental health concerns.

“The impact that has been visible has been the loss of employment for many of our youth and education being online. This has impacted their ability to work toward goals and feeling isolated. We have seen an increase in depression among our young people.”

“COVID-19 has been very traumatic and prior to referring our youth for GED classes or job readiness workshop, they will need counseling or therapy. This pandemic has taken a toll on our youth mentally and emotionally.”

The multiple and cumulating structural factors exposed during this crisis such as unsafe living arrangements, physical vulnerabilities, risky employment, or poor healthcare made the need for care, emotional support and therapy that much more pressing. Of course, COVID made it difficult for service providers to offer private and effective mental health services. Nevertheless, they found ways to connect online through strategies like teletherapy and other telehealth services. This was immensely important in terms of offering words of encouragement, resources, guidance, assistance and helping young people stay on track and out of the justice system. For the service providers, it was the human, relational connection that was and will continue to be of the utmost importance.

“The availability to provide adequate mental health services was greatly impacted. During the COVID-19, we had several clients in need of hospitalization as a result of mental health concerns. We were unable to successfully get them hospitalized due to hospitals being overwhelmed. We absolutely need advocacy on a State level with regards to providing adequate mental health services.”

“We have developed clinical groups to address issues of depression with young people and continue to provide virtual and onsite clinical services on behalf of the mental health department.”

Service providers predict that the reverberating outcomes of this pandemic will cause profound despair and have long-term mental health costs for their clients and their clients’ families. In general, young people and their families do not usually have easy access to counseling and mental health resources but moving forward, this will be an important component of a successful post-COVID response. As life eventually begins returning to a semblance of normalcy, but fears of sickness continue, many will need access to mental health resources and support to help with the emotional toll COVID has had on youth and on the staff.

“We need mental health care the most. We need access to Black and Brown therapists. That is the most important need right now.”

“We need mental health support for participants navigating lock down, emergency financial support for participants unable to make rental payments”

THE TECHNOLOGY GAP: The necessary transition to virtual services was challenging and the clear limitations of technological platforms for providing social services were quickly exposed. Service providers have found it difficult to do their work with clients over the phone or online with other technology platforms. They felt it did not provide the same sense of connection, spontaneity and accountability as services in-person. Young people and providers were often unable to connect with each other in private and safe places. There were many failed attempts at reaching clients, in part because they often share phones or computers with other family or

friends. Even when connecting, it was hard to keep youth engaged and motivated virtually, missing the in-person human interaction.

"It was difficult to solely communicate over the phone even before Covid-19 and we relied on face-to-face interaction to build more meaningful relationships. Because now we have no choice but to communicate via phone calls it has made it that much more difficult since there are now not many other options. It is good if the youth member has access to facetime or other video chat options, but not all people have that option. It will make it extremely hard moving forward to communicate in a personable fashion."

"Many of them do not have phones and are sharing with friends or whoever will allow them to use their phone for a little while to make calls. That's also a challenge. No concrete form of communication."

The necessary transition to virtual services also exposed unequal access their clients had to adequate technologies. Young people living in poverty, especially those in the child welfare system or who are incarcerated, did not have access to and were not sufficiently supplied with the types of technologies they needed to effectively participate in services, programs and school. The large gap for clients in technology included working laptops or tablets, updated software, reliable wireless access, and phones. The gaps also included a lack of widespread support to install, maintain and learn how to use the technology. Service providers sometimes found themselves filling in these gaps so that they could reach their clients successfully.

"We had to purchase phones to give to participants who didn't have a reliable way to communicate with us...We need technology funding/ assistance for participants' phones, laptops, tablets, access to WiFi."

"Although many organizations turned their services into remote work, most of the kids do not have access to a computer or laptop. So, they are unable to progress in their education, career development, therapy, etc."

Service providers anticipate continued increase in online services with the possibility of implementing, as the health risk lessens, a hybrid model that combines in-person with virtual meetings. This means that access to technology as well as the need for technological training (e.g., computer skills) will continue to be a critical issue into the future. Service providers are concerned that the sustained technological barrier will diminish meaningful interactions and make it exceedingly difficult for clients to effectively participate (and get credit for their participation), risking possible reincarceration.

"I fear that without face-to-face interaction and contact, some youth members may not be able to fully engage with the organization. Therefore, they will not have the support they need to make positive changes, leaving them in a position with little guidance and support. This could lead to them going back to what they know and making decisions that put them in a vulnerable spot."

"We are unable to engage with the youth at our office site. Most of our work consists of outreach phone class, texts, emails or Zoom meetings. Many of the attempts have failed. The youth are losing focus and they are living in fear/oppression. They are losing hope and interest in their set goals/desires."

CONNECTION, SUPPORT & ADVOCACY

"We are in desperate need of youth friendly/supportive organizations in all 5 boroughs. The organization may assist with counseling, housing, substance abuse, employment readiness, groups that focus on pre and post

services/support - gangs, HIV/AIDS, STI's, poverty/economics, resilience, leadership, politics, community, referrals, substance abuse, education (GED/HSE), College Now. We have the people that are willing to work and support our communities. We just need the proper funds to help this dream come to life."

"Biggest fear is the City forgetting about them and not recognizing how important it is for them to have someone to support them on their journey to make different choices to live a more fulfilling lifestyle."

There is a feeling from service providers that they will not operate the same post-COVID, with much confusion and many challenges unknown. What is certain however, is that an entire infrastructure of supports for young people and their families - social services, community-based organizations, youth programs, nonprofits - will need significant funding to meet the rising needs. The impact of COVID will have long-term and harmful consequences to their clients, who are largely system-involved Black and Latinx youth. It will accentuate the already existing precarity and uncertainty for these young people and their families. As this happens, their needs for services will grow too.

Service providers rely on building intimate connections with clients in order to provide them with strong support and advocacy. COVID interrupted their services and there is ongoing concern that this disruption will continue long into the future. In this section, we outline some of the ways, despite extraordinary efforts, that COVID impacted the supports provided by service providers, and areas that need improved investment moving forward.

EDUCATION: The move to remote learning was a seismic transition for young people and for many, posed significant challenges for their educational progress. Service providers reported their clients were often falling behind, feeling unmotivated and struggling with access to computers and other necessary materials. Young people missed the concentrated in-person contact with teachers and afterschool supports. They missed the sustained social relationships with peers as well as important rituals like graduation ceremonies. Also, for many, school is a consistent resource for meals and a safe space away from the stress at home.

"Of the youth who were in school, most if not all of their studies have been greatly limited due to the difficulties of remote learning. Many are in need of tablets/computers to move online which we have not yet been able to find for them."

"Virtual education is not working for most of our children. We need to return to some form of relationship-based education or we lose a generation or more."

All the burden was placed on students and caretakers to manage their schooling without adequate resources. Service providers worried that their clients were falling behind and sought ways to provide extra educational support. When possible, they provided computers or other necessary technologies. They also provided other services such as GED assistance or help with college applications. Yet, what they could offer was frequently not enough given the failure of the Department of Education (DOE) to fully support students, especially the most marginalized.

"We struggled with getting the necessary school support, from the DOE, for our school aged clients. Many clients do not have the technology to complete virtual programming. We need advocacy for additional support from the DOE. During this COVID-19 crisis parents and provider agencies were primarily responsible for education and support from DOE was very limited."

"I have clients who enjoy face to face conversations because their home life is hectic. School has been adding to the stress, especially on the current high school graduates. Summer and after school are impacted, so who will be serving them from now until Sept? So many amazing souls with no 'streamlined' way to express themselves in a healthy, safe and productive manner"

Service providers worry that their clients will fall further behind this school year and beyond. They are concerned that access to educational supports, programs, resources and opportunities will continue to be limited or insufficient. Service providers urge the Department of Education to find better ways to bridge virtual connections between students and teachers and in particular, provide extra education supports/tools for students in need and make sure that all students have adequate access to computers and reliable WIFI.

"I anticipate that there will be a much greater need for access to remote learning and participation for our youth members. We are already seeing an inability to participate because of technological limitations, so there will need to be a way for these participants to be able to obtain the necessary tools so that they can make strides towards doing work that shows progress for them."

"There's a strong potential for disengagement with school. A lot of youth may not like committing to staring in front of their screen and staring in front of their phones to complete their assignments. Illiteracy may go up. People may disengage with their education."

PROGRAMS & SERVICES: The pandemic forced many programs and services to be significantly revised, scaled back, temporarily ended, or even permanently terminated. This has obviously impacted young people in need of those programs and services, especially for those who were going through the system, already incarcerated or recently released. Service providers found their clients had difficulty staying connected to programs because of inadequate access to technology and the limits of virtual services as well as the overall precarity caused by the mishandling of the pandemic. For some clients, without the support and guidance from their service provider relationships, progress slowed.

"We are seeing that many of the youth members that we have been working with are having a difficult time being able to participate with programs as many have had limited ability to provide programming. It has also been difficult for many of the kids we work with to feel comfortable during these uncertain times. Jobs, programs and many other things that the young men and women we work with need to make progress are becoming more difficult to come by... It has made it much more difficult to interact in a capacity that fully serves the youth members we work with that we were able to achieve prior to Covid-19. We have to do all of our work remotely which makes it difficult to create deeper relationships with the youth we work with. It has also left a tremendous gap in our ability to serve individuals who are incarcerated at the moment since we are not allowed in the jails. "

"Many programs/community based organizations have been affected and that work, those relationships that have taken years to build are abruptly being cut off - we need more people on the ground, working hands on with youth, trauma-informed and community-based training for those people doing the work; we need more food resources for families - we need to support parents and families."

From the position of service providers, they felt great responsibility to give their clients an opportunity to survive and thrive as much as possible during this pandemic. Their clients have a lot of needs, and they felt responsible to provide them the services, programs and advocacy that they deserved, especially during this crisis. The pandemic significantly changed how they communicated with and supported their clients. Service providers found it very challenging to work at full capacity, to continue providing services and to sustain close virtual connection with youth.

“COVID -19 has made it difficult for us to service our youth. Our youth need shelter, education, employment, resources, Tender Love and Care, Support etc. All of these needs have been limited because of the restrictions COVID-19 has dealt us. It is hard to get in contact with a youth that has recently been released from jail because some do not have a phone, all they have is our work address and pop up to our jobs, but if there is no one there, then they fall back to the strap of the streets, unless they find a way to call us.”

“They need us now more than ever. During this time, it’s them trying to navigate how to survive. How to stay safe, they need our support. We need more access to materials to provide youth in order for them to stay safe. This city needs more jobs, programs and activities for adolescents. There is not much offered to this vulnerable population, when they are, there are always so many stipulations, and they have to be eligible in order to participate. There needs to be more programs that are rooted in investing in the young people.”

Service providers expect that their clients’ needs for full and comprehensive services will only grow as the precarity of this pandemic further exposes their structural vulnerabilities and fear they will be unable to adequately support them. Moving forward, service providers are concerned they will be unable to adequately sustain the deep relationships they built with young people who are/were incarcerated or system impacted. It is the frequent interactions, sometimes daily in person contact, that makes their services effective. For young people already living in difficult conditions and only heightened because of this pandemic, the ongoing challenges of virtual programming/advocacy could result in clients sliding backwards or going deeper in the criminal justice system.

“Support, resources, programs that offer what they need most. They need an education; they need jobs or internships to learn new skills to confidently enter the workforce. There needs to be more preventative initiatives in place for the youth. More activities that youth find interest in. They are the perfect people to find out what those interests are. Youth mentorship is also needed, guidance from their peers who were once in their position.”

“I fear that coronavirus will lead to cuts in innovative violence prevention work, educational approaches, and social services that have just started to actually meet youth where they are at and help them grow within their own communities. I hope that re-entry, job development, diversion programs, and the like will still be funded.”

DETENTION & COURTS: During the height of the pandemic this past spring, which restricted access to the court and to youth in custody, the impacts on those young people detained (e.g., jailed, pre-trial) or already sentenced to incarceration were especially substantial. Service providers emphasized their clients inside were living in unsafe environments, getting sick or at increased risk for sickness. Their programs and education were greatly altered or came to a halt. The progress of their case slowed because the courts adjourned and many case dates were postponed or extended, resulting in longer jail time, prolonged exposure to unhealthy physical and mental conditions, and inadequate supports. Service providers also noted the toll that

remote human connection had on their clients, especially, for example, having to visit with families over video but also their virtual meetings with advocates and teachers.

“Visits from family are restricted to over video, which has families very worried. Finally, because schooling and other services on Rikers have ceased, violence within the jail has increased due to idle time and other tense conditions. Most importantly, youth are largely unaware of how the court's closure is impacting their cases (which have all been postponed indefinitely) and are frustrated at the lack of accountability or progress in their cases.”

“Many of them are stuck in jail and cannot have their cases heard. If they are released they are not given the proper supports to be safe especially during a pandemic.... We cannot meet as many youth as we usually do since we cannot visit Rikers and complete intake. We cannot advocate in Court like we usually do, since everything has been adjourned and only some attorneys have been writing writs. We cannot check up with the kids as we normally do in person.... The most helpful thing the youth we serve needs is the ability to attend virtual court at their promised dates, instead of all cases being adjourned for weeks and weeks and sometimes even months!... I am worried we won't ever have the same access to jails as we once did.... We need access to the newly detained youth on Rikers Island so that we can properly advocate for them.... The older youth at Rikers Island are really in need.”

Social service providers found it exceedingly difficult to support and advocate for detained clients. They found it hard to build relationships with clients and families. It was difficult to meet alone and establish trust with clients online or over the phone since there were concerns that conversations were likely recorded by the Department of Correction. Gaining full access to clients was significantly limited or cut off and, in some cases, service providers resorted to sending letters. This impacted intakes because it was difficult or impossible to visit in person or check up on detained clients, especially on Rikers. With the courts running slowly and with programs limited, it made it difficult for service providers to assist clients in fulfilling their court mandates and advocating for them in court.

“As I work mainly doing direct service in courts and jails, the job and our impact has been limited. Courts are closed and jails are only allowing COs and health staff inside for services, which has made it virtually impossible to support any youth who are incarcerated besides sending letters. It's also difficult to motivate youth to comply with any court mandates when all services are closed or online, and there's no known day that the courts will be re-opened. It's also hard because so many areas where kids could be taking steps to change their circumstances - such as getting a state ID for employment through the DMV, getting a social security card, enrolling in school, finding work - are closed or difficult to access.... Without access to people in person in jails and communities, it is difficult for us to gather information to provide court advocacy, and to build relationships that are sustainable for supporting youth... I also fear that justice in courts, which was already fleeting at best, will cease to exist at all with the lack of urgency that has now been set as precedent. To me, hearing a case is an essential business, especially when someone is jailed pre-trial without bail.”

“Right of privacy to engage with youths in-person has been a challenge. Most of our conversation is likely to be recorded through the Department of Correction whether through phone or televisit communication. There isn't a safe space to build a mentoring relationship with young people due to the restriction DOC imposes... Develop a safer platform of communication with young people and in which program providers can offer their agenda to the young people held in the facility.”

Any prolonged time that clients are detained always, but especially during a pandemic, puts them at risk for becoming sick and impacts not only them but the people, staff, family, neighbors and anyone else who comes in contact with them. Incarceration is a serious public health issue and service providers are worried that the second wave of COVID in NYC will

further stall their clients' progress and put many at a significant health risk. The system is even more inhumane and uncaring right now and pervasive police surveillance in communities increases risk for incarceration. In anticipation of a difficult year ahead, some service providers are asking for a moratorium on detention, a larger number of young people outright released from jails, the remaining detained youth transferred to safer conditions, a reprieve on parole/probation work requirements and for more effective and speedier court processes.

"Our participants that are on Rikers or upstate prison facilities are facing almost certain diagnosis with COVID given the horrible conditions... With a lot of focus and help, we have been able to transfer all of our program over to virtual and are able to take on new participants. However, part of my job in the juvenile detention centers in the city is completely halted for now. Any of our staff who were direct re-entry programming personnel or outreach workers have had to stop for the time being. It is more difficult for us to maintain that connection to our participants and potential new ones within incarceration facilities.... We need continuing advocacy and oversight on how parole specifically is holding our participants up on Rikers and upstate. Since parole interviews can be rescheduled and neglected, that is an immense barrier."

"We need the courts to be able to virtually complete participants whose sentence is up- courts have been refusing to do this, or giving a future court date months in the future (that may or may not happen at this point) which keeps the participant in the system for longer and clogs up the system itself... The courts need to provide services virtually (sharing and signing docs virtually RE: pleas and OOPs), so as to move through the system without unnecessary delays."

WHAT DO YOU MOST NEED RIGHT NOW AND IN THE FUTURE?

"My clients can be looked at in different ways, some are homeless, some have to help provide for their house, some of them are not safe in their homes, or live with at risk people so being home is hard. A lot of my youth need to finish getting their GED but can't because they don't have a laptop or iPad so they have no way to do it. Trying to find a job where they can make money and still be safe is also hard for them if they can't work from home or have programs to get Metro cards from. Some don't have food because they are in a shelter and food banks are running low. Some live [with] abuse [in their] house ... and the way out was if they went to work or school."

"URGENCY. I feel like people who are not in the criminal justice world simply do not care about matters related to those who are justice-involved. I think we need thoughtful pieces that try to convince the general public that we SHOULD care, especially for young justice-involved people. The juvenile justice system is focused on rehabilitation rather than mere punishment so we are literally not working towards this agenda when we do not care about young people who are trying to change the trajectory of their lives after jail. Quite frankly, the average citizen in my community does not care to provide for people who are incarcerated because they point to law-abiding citizens who are also lacking supports."

What direct actions, interventions, organizing or advocacy would be the most immediately helpful to you and your clients right now? What do you anticipate most needing in the coming months and years to best mitigate the longer-term impact of COVID-19 on you and your clients? The central answers to these questions by service providers involved the clear need for significant transformations. When offered the chance to say anything, the people who answered our survey understood that the needs were not incremental but large and fundamental. They expressed the need for young people to access structural equality, for investments in young people and for ending the harm of the criminal legal system.

ACCESS TO STRUCTURAL EQUALITY

COVID has heightened the existing structural inequalities and severe precarity that young people and their families were already facing. COVID has caused unprecedented unemployment and underemployment in communities that already have high poverty rates and this has a massive impact on the young people they serve. When asked what is most needed, it is significant that service providers expressed great concern over the wellbeing of their young clients and frequently raised the urgency of addressing the severe structural inequality that will only grow with the second wave of COVID infections.

ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT: Young clients and their families – especially if they have a criminal record - need adequate employment that allows for a sustained, safe and livable income. More jobs must become available and clients need job training and support finding, getting and keeping work.

ACCESS TO FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE: Young clients need extra economic support like bill relief, public benefit extensions, emergency funding, subsidies, grants, debt forgiveness, and guaranteed income to assist them through this crisis. There is no substitute for reliable and consistent money.

ACCESS TO HOUSING: Young clients need dependable, affordable and safe housing. Clients are increasingly homeless, precariously housed or about to lose their home. They need support finding affordable housing and safely navigating shelters as well as rent relief or an eviction freeze.

ACCESS TO FOOD: Service providers are reporting signs of increasing food insecurity. Young people and their families need healthy, affordable and consistent meals. They need to obtain food through means and in contexts that are safe.

ACCESS TO HEALTH: The young clients and their families were in immediate danger of COVID exposure and will continue to be disparately at risk in the future. They need improved public health and preventative infrastructure that includes safe work, school and facility conditions as well as access to testing, personal protective equipment, and cleaning supplies.

ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY: Young clients need equal access to digital infrastructure including hardware, software and dependable wireless connections, as well as support using the technologies. They need updated technology for regular personal use such as phones, computers and tablets for virtual meetings and remote learning.

INVEST IN YOUTH OF COLOR

Social service providers and community-based organizations provide essential and comprehensive care to young people. Yet, the cost of this crisis is forcing budget cuts and layoffs across the city and state. Cuts to service provider budgets will reduce or eliminate the staff and programming that young people impacted by the justice system desperately need and rely upon now more than ever before. When asked what is most needed, 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.

INVEST IN YOUTH CENTERED SERVICES: Young clients need effective programming and advocacy that offers resources, education, mentorship, support and connections. Quality, youth-friendly services facilitate community safety, offer opportunities to survive/thrive during this crisis and promote futures with dignity and well-being.

INVEST IN EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT: Young clients need additional support with remote learning and after-school programs to guide and advocate for them in their academic path during the pandemic. They need access to reliable technology as well as GED programs and other supportive educational services such as help with college and scholarships.

INVEST IN MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS: Young clients need help navigating the trauma of the pandemic. They need improved access to virtual counseling, particularly with therapists of color, and other mental health services to help manage the accumulating challenges this crisis produces.

INVEST IN SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS: Young clients need the comprehensive support, reliable resources and strong advocacy that service providers offer. Social service providers need to be able to run at full capacity always and especially during a pandemic. This requires state and federal funding, secure city contracts, private funder commitments, increased pay for essential workers and additional financial support to produce a safe workplace environment.

INVEST IN COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS: Young clients need well-funded, youth friendly community-based organizations in their neighborhood. These organizations are on the ground, building relationships, providing what is needed in close connection with local conditions.

END HARM PRODUCED FROM THE CRIMINAL LEGAL SYSTEM

Since its inception, the prison industrial complex - from police to courts to prisons to parole - have disproportionately harmed people of color, particularly Black communities. At best, this is a consequence of a biased system and at worst, it is a feature of a deliberately discriminatory system. The pandemic has only further entrenched the vulnerability, risk and harm young people face when exposed to carceral institutions. When asked what is needed now and in the

future, service providers are calling for a range of immediate reforms and radical transformations to improve the conditions of the criminal legal system for youth.

ADVANCE PROGRESSIVE LEGAL REFORMS: Service providers noted how the juvenile system was rooted more in punishment than rehabilitation. They endorsed a broad slate of progressive reforms to the Youth Part of adult criminal court for example, and to parole, bail and prison labor that would reduce harm. They also offered more specific suggestions contextualized to COVID such as offering a work requirement reprieve to people on parole and probation to reduce risky employment while jobs are scarce.

END YOUTH INCARCERATION: Service providers noted how cruel it is to detain youth. They argue for a continued reduction or complete ending of incarceration as well as the general reduction in scope of the criminal legal system.

PRIORITIZE HEALTH OF INCARCERATED YOUTH: People in detention, jails and prisons were and continue to be disproportionately exposed to COVID, revealing once again the cruelty and precarity of incarceration. Service providers are asking for a moratorium on further detention, a significant (if not complete) reduction in the jail population, a transfer of detained youth to safer conditions, and drastically improved health conditions in prisons.

IMPROVE ADVOCACY FOR INCARCERATED YOUTH: The restrictions enacted due to COVID have made it difficult for incarcerated young people to connect with lawyers, social workers, family and other advocates who can help them navigate the justice system. Service providers are asking that incarcerated youth receive immediate and safe access to the people and programs who/that can advocate for them.

RESTART COURT PROCEEDINGS SAFELY: Service providers are concerned that young people are being detained longer than needed due to COVID. They are asking courts to find safe and fair ways to restart the judicial process through processes such as expanding the criteria for emergency hearings and holding court proceedings and sentencing virtually.

REDUCE POLICE POWER AND PRESENCE: Heavy police surveillance of young people of color, especially Black boys and men, increase their risk of abuse and even death as well as arrest and exposure to the criminal legal system. Service providers are calling for the reduction of police power and responsibility, a divestment from the police budget and a reinvestment in critical social services that can support and empower young people.

AND RAISE THE AGE?

Our research clearly demonstrates that COVID has accentuated the vulnerability of NYC youth involved with the justice system. 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.

“Youth in Rikers are completely left out of conversations of urgency because of their charges and the fact that their age makes them at lower risk. Because of that, jailing them seems like it has been siphoned into the “OK” area in public conversation. Because of Raise the Age, I think there’s this false notion that the advocacy around youth justice has done a lot of its goals. But the 18+ group is still young and developing and deserves similar treatment in court and confinement as 17-year olds.”

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 reconsider incarcerating youth - all youth - completely. Service providers recognized this opportunity as well.

“One thing the COVID-19 crisis is revealing is the failure of Raise the Age to protect all children. We’ve learned that it’s because youth are still allowed to be charged as adults that makes them ineligible to be detained anywhere but secure detention. To get Raise the Age right, it needs to be applied to all youth, regardless of charges, so that we don’t keep on putting youth in jeopardy by pretending they’re adults, even if they are accused of committing the most serious offenses.”

Our post-COVID world will force a reckoning with how our public institutions serve us, keep us safe, allow us to pursue a life with dignity and possibilities. The massive and sustained protests across the country confronting police brutality and its role in criminalizing communities of color, especially Black youth, serves as a critical example. And the whole carceral system is implicated in this outrage; indeed, much more youth justice advocacy is needed.

“One of the most important areas to advocate for is the end of juvenile jails and prisons. It’s a great opportunity to end the youth prison system for good. With the scaling back of court appearances and probation appointments, it’s time to reconsider whether we need such a big juvenile justice infrastructure.”

REDUCING THE HARM OF COVID: MOVING FORWARD WITH POLICY SOLUTIONS

In this final section, 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 that COVID-19 has, is having, and will continue to have on NYC youth involved in the justice system. The conditions are urgent. We offer the following critical policy solutions.

Protect Essential Services and Supports for Vulnerable and Justice-Involved Youth. The State and City budgets are facing considerable revenue shortfalls, and public officials are threatening significant cuts to public funds that support the continuum of services that youth need. We call on the Governor and state legislature, as well as the Mayor and city council, 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 where youth are detained and placed. Bringing back community-based service providers should not be slow-walked, and safety precautions need to be developed to ensure that young people are reconnected with essential supports while mitigating risk of exposure to COVID.

End Detention for Youth and Increase Avenues for Release. Stakeholders worked diligently across the system to release many young people from juvenile and adult detention, and to reduce the use of technical violations that might bring youth into these facilities early on during the pandemic response. We must sustain the urgency around keeping more youth in the community with the supports they need, which requires reliable, well-resourced and effective neighborhood supports, not surveillance.

Invest in Youth-Serving Community-Based Organizations During the COVID Crisis and Recovery. Young people face more vulnerability now than in the recent past. In the face of the large-scale disruption, community loss of life, and economic depression, youth-serving organizations require more resources and capacity than they had before the pandemic began. The needs are greater and the job is harder. Mental health, housing, education, employment and related supports are essential to building a bridge for young people to the other side of this crisis and investing in true community safety. Local, trusted CBOs with deep ties to our neighborhoods are best-equipped to meet these challenges, but the resources required demand significant investment and flexibility.

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 target vulnerable and justice-involved youth for education, training, mentorship, employment and advancement.

Expand Emergency Access to Technology and Financial Supports for Youth. Short-term, stop-gap funding available last Spring and Summer for emergency needs will not sustain young people through the current economic crisis, or protect them adequately if we face a second wave of infection. Youth and their families will have continued need for 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. Raise the Age was just the beginning—there is much more to do legislatively to remove more adolescents and young adults from the punitive adult criminal justice system. More specifically, New York’s Youth Offender (YO) law allows youth younger than 19 the possibility of reduced prison sentences and avoiding the full impact of a permanent criminal record with a non-criminal adjudication. However, this opportunity is unavailable to young people older than 19. *We are calling for New York to expand YO protections to those who are 25 or younger.* On the other end, children as young as age 7 can

be arrested, brought through the legal system, and given Juvenile Delinquent (JD) status. *We are calling for New York 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.*

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