

Imagination From Incarceration: Creative Convenings Inside Youth Prisons

Author's Preface¹

While co-authoring this report, I turned 21. Even though I was on COVID lockdown, it was the first birthday, since I turned 14, that I celebrated as a free person. I spent five years locked up in youth prisons and detention facilities in Illinois. Shortly after I was released, the Children and Family Justice Center asked if I would help co-lead workshops inside the five youth prisons in Illinois. I had served time in four of the five facilities. I could not have imagined myself walking back into a prison I used to do time in, for any reason. However, the opportunity the Children and Family Justice Center offered me was different. I wasn't going back into a facility to play a role in locking kids down; I was coming back to uplift their often forgotten voices. The experience of walking back through the prison doors once I was free was one of a kind and I was nervous to walk back through those loud locked doors.

I learned a lot over the 30-plus workshops. We always asked to meet with the youth with

no guards in the room. We had no issues, no disrespect, interruption, or any disruptive behavior. We always ran out of time because there was so much they wanted to talk about.

We already know what kids need. To be safe, have fun, have a decent education, have spaces to be with their friends safely. Kids from the hood are doing the best they can to get what they need. We know how to solve this problem – privileged kids get to go to therapy, boarding schools, or have access to programming in their local schools that help to get them on a path to a meaningful future. Young people in prison do not have those options. When I was growing up, I could not think beyond my 21st birthday, so it was hard for things to matter. Youth in prison need role models and things to dream about and look forward to; now is the time to reimagine how we can help them dream again.

In This Issue:

- ❖ Insights from 32 convenings inside Illinois state youth prisons and two convenings at an Illinois adult prison
- ❖ 166 youth, 36 staff, and 14 adults incarcerated as youth shared their insights about the current youth prison system and how it should be changed
- ❖ Participants characterized the current system as traumatic, dangerous, more punitive than rehabilitative, and racially disproportionate
- ❖ In separate groups, both staff and youth identified economic opportunity and a range of community investments as important aspects of alternative approaches
- ❖ Youth stressed the importance of context when judging their actions and identified access to food, clothing, and basic supplies as important elements of prevention

Contact:

(312) 503-1479
kollmann@nlaw.northwestern.edu

(312) 503-2386
j-biehl@law.northwestern.edu

<https://www.law.northwestern.edu/legalclinic/cfjc>

Twitter: @CFJCchicago

Northwestern

PRITZKER SCHOOL OF LAW
Bluhm Legal Clinic

Youth Prisons are Traumatizing, Punitive, and Fail to Prepare Youth for Returning Home

Trauma

The physical and emotional conditions of Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice (IDJJ) facilities – combined with the racial disparity visible in the youth prison population – create a traumatizing setting for children. Young people in prison described conditions of constant surveillance: they are locked in their rooms with a total lack of privacy, ever-glaring lights, and little to do “but stare at the walls.” The physical environment is

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not only carceral, but dangerous and unhygienic. “People get beat up every day. We can’t ever get clean because there’s mold dropping on us and mice crawling in your bed... We wake up in the morning and have bad food, but at least we don’t have lice anymore.”

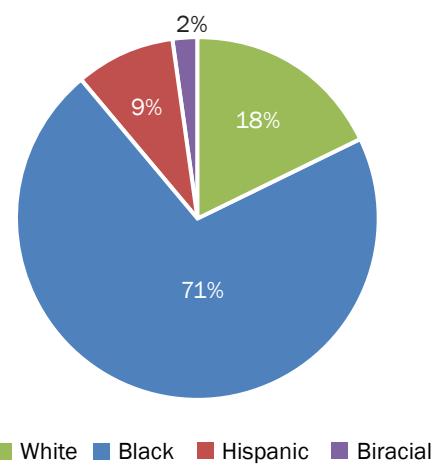


Further exacerbating these circumstances is the disproportionate percentage of Black youth incarcerated in IDJJ. While only 15% of youth

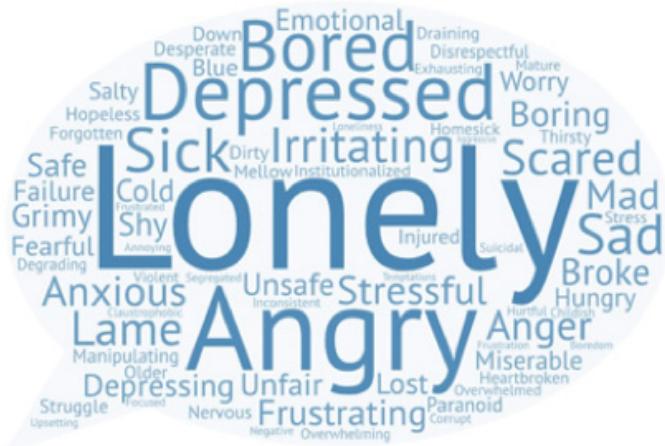
“[i]t says there’s white people [in IDJJ]. . . I’m not seeing white people here.”

in Illinois are Black, more than 70% of youth in IDJJ custody are Black.² After reviewing data similar to what is presented in this chart, one being white people here.” In *every* convening of incarcerated youth, participants brought up concerns about systemic racism and discriminatory justice practice.

Race/Ethnicity of DJJ Youth



This chart is adapted from the Race/Ethnicity of DJJ Youth chart from The Final Five Campaign: <https://www.thefinal5campaign.com/data>. Percentages have been added for clarity. This chart reflects the racial breakdown of youth in custody as of June 30, 2020. While this chart presents a snapshot, this disparity is typical of the trend over time.



These word clouds illustrate the most common words and phrases that youth participants used to describe their emotional state and perception of their time in IDJJ custody.



Young people struggle with the fact that they are in prison and acknowledge that “it messes with you. Not a little, a lot.” In 20 of 25 sessions during which incarcerated youth were asked to describe their emotional experience within IDJJ, the youth reported their experience as being lonely and depressing. Young people also described their experiences as oscillating between scary and boring.

“not a place that makes you want to change [but instead] a place that makes you more mad.”

- IDJJ staff

IDJJ staff echo the sentiments expressed above. Staff participants frequently recognized that “a lot of these youth are really hurting” and one staff member noted that the conditions of IDJJ facilities ensure that youth prison is “not a place that makes you want to change [but instead] a place that makes you more mad.”

Punishment

Despite IDJJ's stated mission to "promote . . . positive youth outcomes,"³ most incarcerated youth described the experience as focused more on punishment than rehabilitation. Among the youth participants, there was a lack of consensus concerning the role of youth prisons, and most simply did not know what rehabilitation was or

how to define the term. One young man noted that being in IDJJ “makes us feel like we don’t belong in society,” and another shared

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that “[prison] is not helpful to me, it’s pure punishment.” Overall, the youth reported feeling shamed, criminalized, and punished, but not prepared for reintegration into broader society.

Staff in IDJJ shared that these “are just kids and have hard situations to deal with,” indicating their shared view that children in IDJJ custody need significant rehabilitation, rather than purely punishment. In spite of this, **staff noted that the current structure of youth prisons makes them feel like their primary role is to maintain control and security within the facilities by tracking the behavioral infractions of young people, forcing them to emotionally detach from the children in their care.**

Counterproductivity

The youth perceive a lack of meaningful programming for them within the prisons, contributing to their assertion that IDJJ is focused more on punishment than rehabilitation. Questions posed about the kinds of programming available in IDJJ elicited laughter from youth participants, and one exclaimed, “Programming? We sit on the units all day.” While participants noted some access to indoor recreation, they reported limited access to the outdoors and viewed their detention setting as “daycare with barbed wire.” IDJJ staff shared parallel views, categorizing their role as a “glorified babysitter” with little ability to intervene positively in the lives of incarcerated youth. Young people in IDJJ facilities overwhelmingly spend free time watching TV and playing cards, despite citing a desire for more productive outlets. Essentially, the limited programming available is repetitive, unengaging, and fails to adequately prepare youth for meaningful reintegration into communities. “[They say this place] changes lives, helps you get educated, helps you succeed, corrects behavior, but it’s not doing that. . . this [place]. . . has given me more mental health problems.”

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Staff identified IDJJ as a “breeding ground” for future criminality, and during nine of the convenings with youth, participants explicitly mirrored this perspective that youth prisons set-up youth for future incarceration or violence. “[Youth prisons] are a set-up: you get some months, get out, play around, get back in.” Young people shared the notion that incarceration interrupts community violence only insofar as it temporarily gets kids “away from the streets,” and that youth prison serves as an additional step in the continuation of cyclical violence

and incarceration. Many youth participants mentioned having siblings and parents who are currently or formerly imprisoned, and this generational cycle of incarceration is painfully apparent for incarcerated youth who are also

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parents. In considering all these factors, youth perceived a high likelihood of their own future incarceration - a stark contrast to IDJJ’s stated goal of positive youth outcomes.



The Juvenile Legal System Must Contextualize Youth Actions by Asking, “Why?”

During the convenings, the youth participants overwhelmingly reported the importance of asking, “Why?” Many of the young people expressed their experience of violence as a continuum: the offense which led to their incarceration was not the sole moment of harm in their lives, but rather one in an overwhelming array of moments in an environment defined by violence. One young man shared that the only way to avoid violence in his neighborhood was to “stay in your crib,” an impossible task for anyone, but especially a teenager. They perceived their time in IDJJ custody as yet another violent punctuation in this continuum. Furthermore,

youth participants emphasized the impact of community violence and how it prevented them from having a space in which they felt they could safely grow, learn, and mature.



In all 27 convenings, youth participants were asked to assume a judge's role in sentencing young people in different hypothetical scenarios. The first hypothetical involved a 16-year-old convicted of gun possession. The second posited a 16-year-old convicted of first-degree murder in an act of retaliatory gang violence. These were first-time offenses for both hypothetical teenagers. Youth participants were asked to determine the appropriate response and sentencing for these teens, without being confined by the options available in the current criminal legal system. The youth were encouraged to think creatively and imagine what they felt would best help to reintegrate and rehabilitate the teenagers. Youth participants proved so familiar with the current system that at first they struggled to think of sentencing approaches beyond those defined in the various statutes which they have come to know by heart.

In the first scenario, which posited a 16-year-old who faced first-time conviction of gun possession, youth participants unanimously asked, "Why was he carrying a gun?" and called for contextualized treatment and understanding the young person's circumstances when sentencing. The youth also overwhelmingly

called for release or some form of probation and persistently questioned the criminality of the weapons charge. Participants expressed that sentencing which did not end in detention or separation from his family or community would be the best way to achieve rehabilitative results for this teenager. In the second scenario, which imagined a 16-year-old facing a first-degree murder conviction, youth similarly called for contextualized treatment. In 22 of 25 convenings, youth participants specifically called for the teenager to be sentenced in the juvenile system, rather than the adult system, and stressed the importance of restorative programming such as "spending time with the victim's mother," college, and mental health treatment. Another feature in these responses was the geographic removal of the youth from his community, as the youth worried the teen could face retaliatory violence if directly released.

The youth participants creatively imagined better environments in which the hypothetical teenagers could get the resources they needed to prepare for adult life. Groups discussed the importance of expanding opportunities available to youth in their communities, including

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opportunities to broaden horizons, travel outside their neighborhoods, and to witness the diverse possibilities that exist for young people. Youth were excited to imagine even basic experiences like chaperoned sleepover parties at their high schools – familiar rites of passage they are often denied by circumstance.

Economic Opportunities and Community Investment Will Enhance Public Safety and Reduce Youth Incarceration

Economic Opportunity

When considering alternatives and solutions to youth incarceration, currently and formerly incarcerated youth cited access to job opportunities more than anything else. Several young people spoke about how experiencing food and housing insecurity compelled them to steal, and reflected that having a job would have prevented that. As one participant shared, “It all starts with poverty in the community. It doesn’t start when we commit a crime.” As a solution, another young person stated that he would have liked to have had “a job at a young age so I wouldn’t have to steal.” Another young man imagined owning his own greenhouse, sharing that in addition to providing him with economic security, it would give him something meaningful to do every day. “Give kids jobs where they can earn an honest dollar because that’s all they want.”

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Community Investment

In 25 of 26 convenings, participants indicated that various forms of community investment and addressing human needs could prevent future harm. Their ideas included job training, affordable housing, educational programming, mental health resources, revamped parks and recreation, and food banks. As one young man shared, “My mom got in a car accident and couldn’t work, so we had no money, and I had to steal. That’s why I’m here. Just needed some support. I just needed somewhere with food that was warm, couches – it doesn’t have to be all that, just somewhere to be.” Several young people, in reflecting on the lack of mentorship they had received prior to incarceration, noted that they needed “guidance to start my life over” and “a

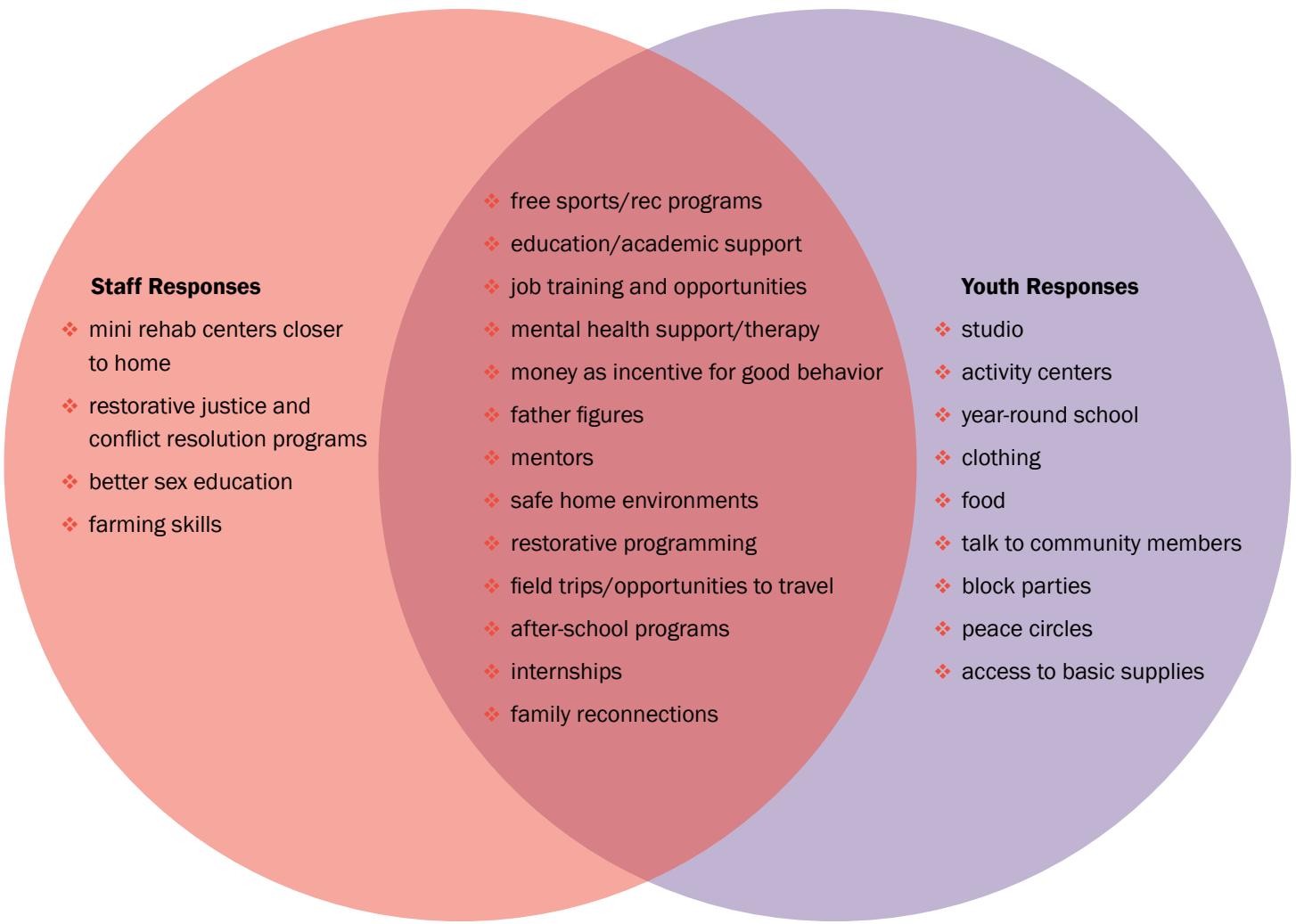
“My mom got in a car accident and couldn’t work, so we had no money, and I had to steal. That’s why I’m here. Just needed some support. I just needed somewhere with food that was warm, couches – it doesn’t have to be all that, just somewhere to be.”

positive male role model to lead me in the right direction.” When asked what the facility should be, if no longer a youth prison, participants focused on utilizing the facilities to address community needs for employment, health, and recreation resources.



If this facility were no longer a prison, I imagine it to be a:

- ❖ Trade school
 - ❖ Farm
 - ❖ Homeless shelter
 - ❖ Drug rehabilitation center
 - ❖ Mental health facility
 - ❖ Job readiness center
 - ❖ Library
 - ❖ Community sports center
 - ❖ Section 8 housing complex
 - ❖ Free college campus
 - ❖ Public concert hall
 - ❖ Food bank
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Youth and staff were asked what would prevent young people from being sent to IDJJ youth prisons in the first place. Most responses were repeated several times, and many were mentioned by (separate) youth and staff groups alike.

IDJJ staff members acknowledged that communities need resources in order to prevent youth incarceration, with one commenting that “it is egotistical to believe we [IDJJ staff] can do anything for [young people] if we just send them back to bad environments.” The core ideas of staff overlapped with the ideas the youth participants had for investing in juvenile justice resources. Staff overwhelmingly viewed community investment, job training, and mentorship programs as constructive solutions to replace the current carceral system.

Conclusion

Young people in prison are clear that the current system is traumatizing, punishing, and is counterproductive to IDJJ’s stated goal of providing youth with positive outcomes. They

have stressed the importance of context in evaluating youth behavior and responding to violence on an individualized basis. The young people illustrated the importance of investing in economic opportunities and community services to make communities safe and reduce youth incarceration. Staff members who work in Illinois Youth Centers are in agreement that youth prisons in their current form are more harmful than helpful to young people, and that investment in communities and job training are key steps to enhancing public safety and reducing incarceration.

Methodology

Between July 2019 and July 2020, the Children and Family Justice Center (CFJC) hosted 32 convenings at Illinois’ youth prisons, officially

known as Illinois Youth Centers (IYC). The discussion format was co-designed with formerly incarcerated youth. A youth leader and a CFJC staff person co-facilitated each convening.

Convenings prior to March 14, 2020 were conducted in person. Convenings after March 14, 2020 were conducted via videoconference. The CFJC held separate convenings for youth and staff. The CFJC also hosted two convenings at the Illinois Department of Corrections for 14 incarcerated adults who had been incarcerated in one of Illinois' youth prisons.

In total, 166 youth, 36 staff, and 14 adults incarcerated as youth participated.

Participants were asked to complete an optional personal information form. In total, 143 youth (86%), 16 staff (44%), and 2 (14%) adults incarcerated as youth completed the information form. Some participants did not answer every question.

Questions about sex, gender, race, and ethnicity were presented as open-ended spaces to fill in, permitting people to self-identify. They are presented here according to the pattern of responses. Where responses could be identifying, the answers are grouped, as in the "Multiracial/Other Specified Race" category. Responses for the two adults at IDOC who completed the form are not included as they could be identifying.

Among youth respondents:

98% identified as male and 2% identified as female. 73% identified as Black, 13% as White, 7% as Latinx, and 7% as multiracial or another specified race.

Youth responded to questions about their home primarily by city and sometimes neighborhood. Grouped into regions, they answered: Cook (40%); Northern Illinois (outside of Cook) (19%); Central Illinois (27%); Southern Illinois (10%) and outside of Illinois (4%).

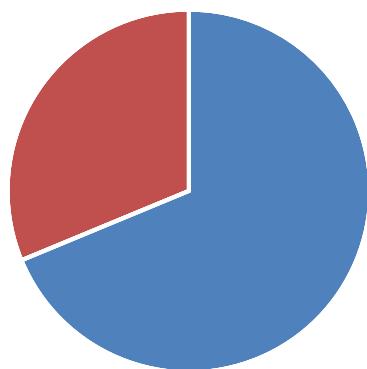
46.2% of youth reported having a friend or family member confined as a young person, while 53.8% did not respond to the question.

Among staff respondents:

68.8% identified as male, and 31.3% as female. 81.3% were aged 31-50 and 18.7% between the ages of 26-30. 50% identified as White, 31% as Black, 13% as Latinx, and 6% as multiracial or another specified race.

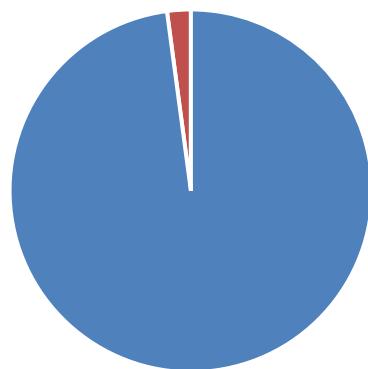
12.5% of staff responded that they had a friend or family member who had been confined when they were young; 6% of staff reported some degree of justice system contact when they themselves were young people.

Sex/Gender Responses, Staff Participants



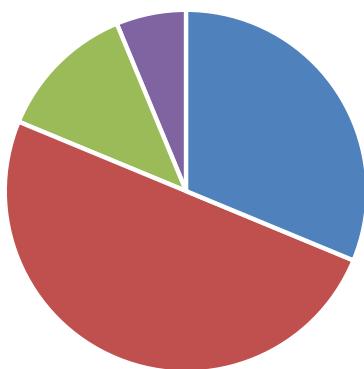
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Sex/Gender Responses, Youth Participants



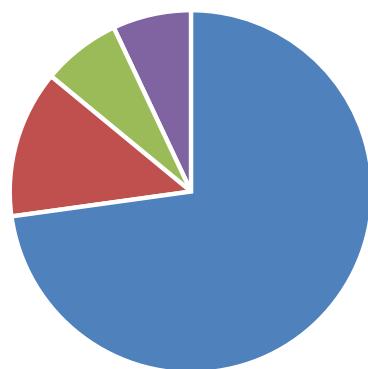
■ Male ■ Female

Staff Race/Ethnicity Responses



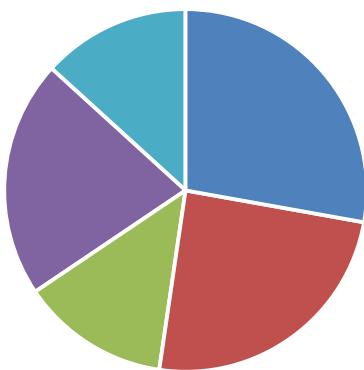
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Youth Race/Ethnicity Responses



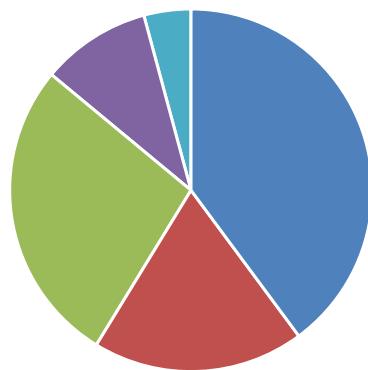
■ Black ■ White ■ Latinx ■ Multiracial/Other Specified Race

Youth and Staff Responses by Location



■ IYC-Chicago ■ IYC-Pere Marquette ■ IYC-Warrenville
■ IYC-Harrisburg ■ IYC-St. Charles

Home Region Responses (Youth)



■ Cook County ■ Central IL ■ Outside IL
■ Northern IL (non-Cook) ■ Southern IL

Acknowledgements

After the Children and Family Justice Center completed hosting community convenings,⁴ it was clear that if we were to achieve our goal of ensuring that the voices of the people most impacted by the youth prison system were included in our series, we must hear from the incarcerated youth and the correctional officers. Thankfully, Director Heidi Mueller approved the CFJC's request to host convenings in Illinois' five youth prisons. In fact, she enthusiastically supported the endeavor. We are grateful to Director Mueller for her backing and collaboration and for that of her executive team and the administrators at each prison; without their cooperation, this project and report would not exist.

As with the community convenings, this report is the summation of nearly two years of work developing the protocol, format, and approach; working with administrators at each prison to schedule the multiple convenings; training the co-facilitators; organizing, hosting and taking notes at each convening; analyzing the participants' responses into themes and then writing the report. Neither the convenings nor this report would have happened without the hard work, tenacity and dedication of Sarah Silins. CFJC clinic students Alexandra Kuske and Rebecca Rieckhoff traveled back and forth across Illinois to facilitate workshops and speak to young people. AnnMarie Brown,

Alicia Brown and Denzel Burke co-facilitated several workshops, and their wisdom and insight continually helped improve the materials and format of the workshops. Denzel Burke, Thomas Hagan, Cecilia Kearney, Sarah Silins and Jennifer Shanahan analyzed the notes and drafted the report. In addition, the following people volunteered time to take notes at the convenings which was essential as they could not be recorded: Danielle Berkowsky, Laura Buttitta, Tessa Courtney, Brigit Crosbie, Andrea Dantus, Ben Diaz, Emma Kurs, Emily McCormick, Caitlin Nguyen, Noelle Petrowski, Kate Polk and Devorah Segal. Arielle Tolman generously contributed her time, wisdom, and energy. She facilitated workshops, supported coding and writing, and is a wonderful teacher and model for protecting young people and paying attention to whose voice might be drowned out, therefore ensuring vulnerable voices are well cared for.

Finally, and most importantly, we thank every young person and staff member who participated in the convenings, sharing their stories, wisdom, and in many situations, their pain and their worries. We were grateful for your honesty, openness, and willingness to share. You are the authors of this report; thank you for allowing us to listen.

Suggested Citation:

Sarah Silins, Denzel Burke, Thomas Hagan, Jennifer Shanahan, *Imagination from Incarceration: Creative Convenings Inside Youth Prisons*, CHILDREN AND FAMILY JUSTICE CENTER, COMMUNITY SAFETY & THE FUTURE OF ILLINOIS' YOUTH PRISONS VOL. 8 (November 2020).

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- 1 The preface is an excerpt from Denzel Burke, *Going Back Inside: Reflections on Creative Convenings Inside Youth Prisons*, CHILDREN AND FAMILY JUSTICE CENTER, COMMUNITY SAFETY & THE FUTURE OF ILLINOIS' YOUTH PRISONS VOL. 7 (November 2020).
 - 2 Illinois Racial Breakdown Data from The Final Five Campaign, <https://www.thefinal5campaign.com/data>
 - 3 Mission Statement, Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice, <https://www2.illinois.gov/idjj/Pages/AboutUs.aspx>
 - 4 Arielle Tolman, Sarah Silins, Alexandra Kuske, and Rebecca Rieckhoff, *Community Convenings: Reimagine Investments in Illinois' Youth*, CHILDREN AND FAMILY JUSTICE CENTER, COMMUNITY SAFETY & THE FUTURE OF ILLINOIS' YOUTH PRISONS VOL. 6 (July 2020).