

YOUTH VOICE COMMISSION YOUTH OUTREACH PROJECT FINAL REPORT 2025

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Introduction

The Youth Voice Commission (YVC) convenes to meet two statutory requirements of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act: 1) it serves as a leadership building and recruitment pipeline program for youth and young adults interested in becoming governor-appointed representatives on Wisconsin's State Advisory Group (SAG); and 2) its mission is to "contact and seek regular input from juveniles currently under the jurisdiction of the juvenile justice system."

The YVC recruits young adults between ages 14-27 with lived experience in the juvenile justice system or an interest in juvenile justice policy. The group receives training on policy, data collection and analysis, restorative practices, and professional development. The YVC members conduct focus groups, listening sessions, and surveys of youth in the juvenile justice system and advocate for initiatives and policy improvements.

The YVC Youth Outreach Project fulfills the second goal as outreach to justice involved youth. This report serves as a final product detailing the intent, method, results, and next steps of the project. The purpose of the outreach project was to find useful data that would help members, policy makers, and community understand how the youth justice system operates and where it is going wrong. This report uses the voices of youth with lived experience to illustrate these issues. The

report brings forward concerns of those with lived experience in secure juvenile facilities and delivers information to those who can foster change.

The main conclusion of the outreach project is that Youth want to be seen as people. They are asking for help and support. They want to be integrated into a healthy family and community and pursue their ambitions. Many youth may feel safe in facilities but don't always feel comfortable. The facilities meet some of youth's needs but may lack structures and support. The YVC hopes to convey the following core points with this report:

- 1) Youth's experience in detention centers is complex with supportive elements alongside unpleasant or alienating experiences.
- 2) Positive action is possible to change the culture, physical structure, and programming available in facilities.
- 3) Detention centers and policy makers should provide opportunities for youth to express themselves and feel more comfortable. Take what youth have to say seriously.

Project Design

Wisconsin's juvenile detention centers house youth at various points in the juvenile justice system from pre-trial holds through post-disposition long-term treatment. The basics of facility construction and minimum services are governed by administrative code and monitored by the Department of Corrections. However, each facility differs in terms of appearance, staff culture, and services available to youth while in the facility and upon reentry. Youth in these facilities have a valuable perspective on the justice system and conditions in the facilities. They can give critical context to system reform efforts from court terms to facility paint color, from staff culture to reentry services.

The Youth Outreach Project was a youth-led and adult supported effort to understand the experience of youth in juvenile detention facilities. The project aimed to collect information that could be used to inform policy makers regarding conditions in secure facilities, necessary system reforms, and critical services for youth reentering the community. The target population included youth ages 10-16, placed in Wisconsin secure juvenile detention centers. The intended audience of the project includes the Governor's Juvenile Justice Commission (GJJC), Wisconsin's SAG, facility staff, state and local government officials, and researchers.

The YVC adapted and replicated the Iowa Youth Justice Council Talking Wall method to collect feedback from youth in two secure juvenile detention centers – Dane County and La Crosse County. Each visit started with introductions from all YVC members, staff members,¹ and participating youth. YVC members described the purpose of the project and how the feedback will be used. Youth were informed that all their responses would be recorded and reported anonymously and would not be tied to their names or cases. YVC members made sure to emphasize to youth and staff that participation in the project is optional and voluntary—no youth were required, obligated, or forced to share their views. All youth were notified using clear language

¹ Facility staff were present during the entire project visit, including while youth were responding to questions during the discussion portion.

how their feedback was to be used. Approximately 15 youth participated in the two facilities combined.

The first stage of the Talking Wall was for YVC members to read each question out loud to the group and each participant then wrote their responses on sticky notes (one idea per sticky note). Participants could post as many responses as they liked on each question. During the second stage, participants were given several star stickers and were given the opportunity to mark the sticky notes containing the ideas they considered most important or that they agreed with the most. The final stage involved DOJ staff gathering all the responses organized by importance and YVC members facilitating a conversation with participating youth about the starred responses to get more detailed information and context. Throughout each stage, YVC members were available to support youth who struggled with literacy and writing—the questions were read aloud, YVC members would write responses dictated by youth, and read out responses during the starring and listening session section. The hybrid method provided qualitative data in the form of written responses and more detailed context through the ranking and discussion process. There were several ways to address barriers to participation, ensuring that all youth that wanted to share could do so in a manner that worked for them.

YVC members asked youth the following questions:

1. Do you feel safe in the facility? If yes, what makes you feel safe? If not, what makes you feel worried or anxious in the facility? What would help you feel more comfortable?
2. Where within the facility do you feel most comfortable? Least comfortable?
3. Do you feel like the staff, teachers, and providers within the facility care about you and want you to succeed? If not, what should staff do to support you? If yes, what do staff do to support you? What can staff, teachers, and providers do to support you? How do they support you now?
4. What services or support do you need to do well once you leave the facility? (School, housing, food, clothing, jobs, legal services, family support)
5. Do you prefer to be referred to as a “youth”, “young person”, or “juvenile”? Why or why not?
6. Would you rather wear your facility uniform or your street clothes to court? Why or why not? (La Crosse only).

YVC members analyzed the responses, sorting each into core themes: youth needs and feelings, individual choice and control, structure and policies, relationships with staff, physical environment, and services and programs.

Recommendations and Analysis

Safety and Comfort

1. Provide more comfortable beds and better hygiene products.
2. Create and equip a regulation station or wellness room.
3. Infuse youth spaces with color, art, and natural light.
4. Allow youth opportunities for creative expression.
5. Provide time and space outside in nature.

The Youth Voice Commissioners began this project hypothesizing that the physical appearance and attributes of the facilities would have an impact on the youth living in the facility. They included multiple questions aiming to assess whether youth actually felt this way: whether they felt safe and comfortable, or unsafe and uncomfortable, as well as why or why not. Youth's responses varied between the two facilities and correspond to the differences in design.

At La Crosse County, the facility is largely painted white except for the "Conference Room." There are some posters on the walls with affirmations or encouragements. However, the places where youth spend most of their time are blank and stark. The conference room, by contrast, has blue carpeted walls and ceiling. It is small with a table and chairs for visits from legal representatives, social workers, and others. Youth can also request to visit the conference room by themselves with staff supervision to regulate themselves.



1 LA CROSSE COUNTY JDC CONFERENCE ROOM



2 LA CROSSE COUNTY JDC DAY ROOM

Youth at La Crosse County varied in their assessment of the facility's safety and comfort. One youth responded that the facility was "not safe: the paint, the cells." While another wrote that "yes [the facility was safe] because they have places you can go to feel comfortable. During the discussion the youth explained that the cells felt enclosed, making the youth feel like they are trapped or expected to explode. They would like more color—the blank walls make them feel like they lose track of time or are trapped in their minds. The youth felt most comfortable in their cells, the shower, and the Conference Room. These are all places where it is quiet, and they can be by themselves. The youth were particularly animated when discussing the qualities of the Conference Room, explaining that they can't get in trouble there, they like the blue walls, the quiet, and good reverberation for music.

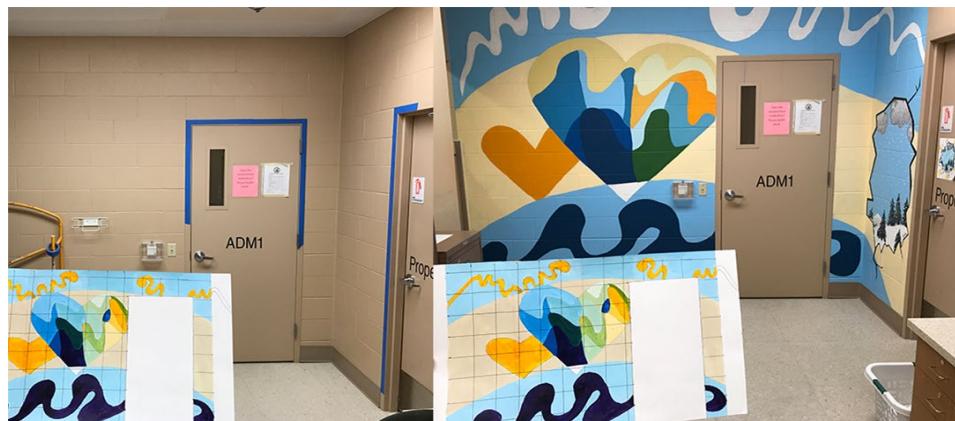
At Dane County, the facility is largely a warm tan color interspersed with full-wall colorful and aspiration-covered murals developed and painted by past youth residents collaborating with local artists. The murals are placed in the entry hallway, the phone wall, and in the community room and classroom. The facility includes a main recreation room, classroom, bedrooms/cells, a gym, and shower areas.



3 DANE COUNTY JDC ENTRYWAY MURAL “WE WISH YOU KNEW” BY MARIA SCHIRMER



4 DANE COUNTY JDC INTAKE HALLWAY MURAL BY CARLOS GACHARNA



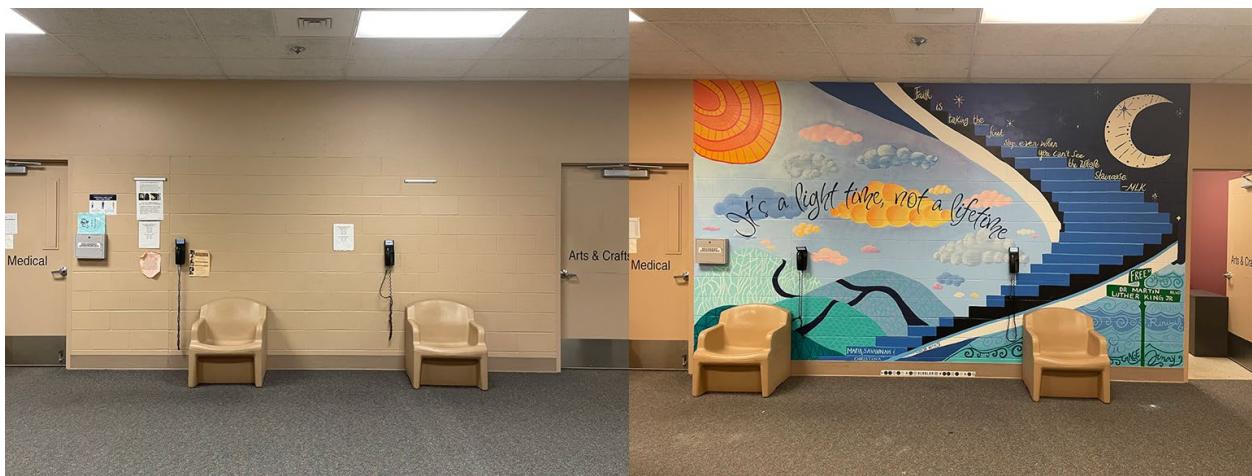
5 DANE COUNTY JDC INTAKE ROOM BY JERRY BUTLER



6 DANE COUNTY JDC VISITING ROOM "SUNNY HORIZONS" BY RODRIGO CARAPIA



7 DANE COUNTY JDC HALLWAY "RISE" BY LESLEY ANNE NUMBERS & LAUDEN NUTE



8 DANE COUNTY JDC DAYROOM "THE FIRST STEP" BY MARIA SCHIRMER, SAVANNAH STARLIN & CHRISTINA THEOBALD



9 DANE COUNTY JDC "Look Within" BY AUDIFAX



10 DANE COUNTY JDC GYM "The Well of Being" BY CHRIS MADDOX



11 DANE COUNTY JDC SCHOOL "METRO PANTHERS" BY AUDIFAX

Youth at Dane County responded that they felt most comfortable in the shower or the gym. Some youth felt comfortable in their room. During the discussion, youth displayed contrasting impacts of

their room: some highlighted that their room is comfortable because it is silent and there is time to think. Other youth mentioned that their room feels bad, it makes them feel out of control because they can be put in their room without their choice, making them feel trapped. The shower, by contrast, was seen as positive by most youth—it was comfortable because the sounds of the water are soothing, and it tunes out thoughts. Multiple youth discussed wanting a “blue room” or other neutral space to rest and “crash out.” They discussed having and liking such a room at their school that had music, puzzles, and exercise tools that would help them keep calm. On a more basic level, youth want better hair care products and soap as well as outside time and space, even just for fresh air such as a courtyard or use of the facility’s open air exercise area.²

At both facilities, youth discussed having trouble sleeping on uncomfortable beds and missing access to music and art supplies. Youth reported not being allowed to sing in the common area or listen to music. They would like more choice in music options and the ability or tools to make their own music. Others requested pencils and drawing supplies.

Staff Support

1. Hire staff that are consistent, caring, and dedicated to working with youth.
2. Provide staff training on communication, culture, and diversity with youth.
3. Build trusting relationships between staff and youth.
4. Be judicious and clear when enforcing rules or exercising authority over youth.

Staff are a constant presence within secure juvenile detention centers. They supervise and interact with youth 24/7. Other staff, contractors, and volunteers ensure that all their daily basic needs are met including physical and mental health providers, teachers, and mentors. The most common are Youth Counselors (more commonly understood as security staff). One or more of these staff members were present with the Youth Voice Commission members during the entire survey and listening session process. Most sat back while the youth participated in discussing their experiences. Other times they chimed in to contextualize and share their perspective on some of the feedback shared by the youth. Despite their presence during the listening sessions, the youth residents shared feedback on their experiences with staff candidly. At one facility, there was only one girl and there was no female staff present during the listening session. The girl, though she responded to portions of the discussion, was quite shy. The YVC members think that the staff and other residents’ gender ratio could have contributed to her quietness.

At both facilities, staff were mentioned as an aspect that contributes to their sense of safety in the facility remarking that “staff members are there when you need them.” However, there was also an acknowledgement that the youth’s experience of staff varied from person to person. To the youth, some staff are supportive, some are not, while the most just “do their job” and “do what they’re paid to do.” At both facilities, teachers were highlighted as supportive staff.

² Youth at La Crosse County have access to an outside gym/recreation area. Dane County youth do not have access to any outside space.

Youth explained that they feel most supportive when staff share their concerns about their mental health, are there for them when they need someone, and check up on their emotions. Essentially, youth recognize and value staff building positive relationships with them.

Youth felt most divided and more negatively about staff administered discipline. Youth at both facilities referenced that some staff are quicker to put them in their room or take free time without explanation. Other youth felt that staff were supportive and that “they’re teaching you responsibility.” Youth felt more supported when staff “show us instead of telling” or when they redirect youth and explain the reason for a loss in privileges.

In addition to changes in staff approaches, cultural diversity training that would help staff relate better to youth, and support for trauma-informed care, youth want more mentoring and providers to amplify the support in the facility.

Services

1. Connect youth to confidential peer or adult mentors.
2. Provide options for youth to get religious ministration from their specific religion.
3. Support external connections through more phone calls and more time per phone call.
4. Provide access to technology with music, games, music recording apps.
5. Provide mental health services and educate youth on their availability.
6. Provide family reentry and reintegration resources.
7. Connect youth to legal services.
8. Provide educational support.
9. Provide professional development support.
10. Develop safe and positive community space to meet with friends and enjoy positive activities.

“All, all, all.” This quote represents the services youth find valuable and needed both while they are in the facility and when they go home to their families and communities. The specific needs of the young people highlighted range from basics like housing, food, and jobs, to emotional and spiritual connections. Because facilities provide required basics like food, shelter, education, legal services, mental and physical health services, the youth focus on higher level support in the facility. Supportive and confidential mentorship was desirable to help them catch up and keep on track, a mentor to visit them while in the facility. They would like to choose between a peer or adult mentor and want that mentor to be confidential.

Other youth mentioned a desire for religious support both inside and outside the facility. The youth explained that there are church services in the facility but only for Christians, nothing for them as a Muslim. More diversity in faith traditions and services or chaplaincy for youth in the facility would address this issue. Additionally, educating youth on what services are available within the facility, including mental health professionals, would ensure youth are able to take advantage of resources that are already available.

Even simpler than mentors and therapists, youth at Dane County want more phone calls and more time for each phone call. Currently, they receive two ten-minute phone calls each shift. They would prefer two 30-minute calls per shift.

Youth consistently referenced wanting support for catching up on their schoolwork, getting and keeping a job, and other independent living needs like housing and food. Youth at La Crosse County referenced ambitions to go to college and sought help with college applications and financial aid.

Outside of these basic needs, family dynamics and community environment stood out as themes for reentry services. Youth at Dane County mentioned that a change in environment and our surroundings could help them have a fresh start and meet new people. They wanted services to address the fact that family members and family dynamics are partially responsible for bad behavior and should be part of the solution. Therapy should help to show the family's role and shouldn't just blame the kid. Youth at La Crosse County were also attentive to the importance of positive peers and safe places to be a kid—they want better people to hang out with and better places to meet up. They are looking for places to play games, be outside with their family, and enjoy hobbies like skateboarding and recording music. They ultimately want to be “set up with the tools to stay out” of the facility.³

Policy and Culture

1. Refer to youth as youth or by their name instead of juvenile.
2. Allow youth to wear street clothes to court instead of facility uniforms.

There is a national debate about terminology in a variety of fields. The justice system is no exception. There are a variety of terms proposed to refer to what is currently known as the juvenile justice system, including, youth justice system, juvenile legal system, and youth legal system. Of course, there are arguments for and against each of these. Along with the debate about the system overall there is a similar discussion about how to refer to young adults and children making their way through this system. The Youth Voice Commission thought that these discussions did not adequately consider the perspectives of the children themselves. To infuse the discussion with critical perspectives and allow these young folks to exercise their autonomy and self-determination, the YVC members asked youth about how they preferred to be referred to.

The YVC hypothesized that youth would prefer to be referred to as just that—youth. Many youth stated that they preferred to be called by their name. The participants brought nuance to the conversation. The participants did not prefer juvenile because it made them “feel meant to fail” or that it “seems like a troubled kid” showing an awareness of the negative stereotypes attached to the term. Instead, participants preferred “youth, growing young adult” or “young man, because I’m growing up more and more every day.” While these more neutral terms were preferred, some youth expressed a sense of ambiguity to the term “juvenile” indicating that they didn’t mind it and that in other contexts is not negative. They clearly understood the importance of context shaping the

³ Youth at La Crosse County participating in the CORE program are allowed to leave the facility for certain outings and activities during the Integration and Reentry phases. Handbook: https://lacrossecounty.org/docs/default-source/human-services/core-academy-handbook.pdf?sfvrsn=939c1ad1_0.

meaning of words. They ultimately want to be seen as people who are trying their best and growing up to be better.

After the first visit, the YVC added a question to the list for the La Crosse County visit about whether youth should be allowed to wear their street clothes to court instead of facility uniforms. Clothing is a part of individuals' expression and presentation. Different clothing prompts different reactions and interpretations by others, including court staff and others present during a case. There may be biases about the youth based on whether they arrive at court wearing a detention uniform or their own outfit from home.

The youth at La Crosse County all agreed that street clothes are preferred. The participants highlighted that clothing can say something about the person wearing them. The participants described how they feel when they wear their own clothes as comfortable, safe, presentable, clean, and like themselves. While a small change, allowing youth to wear their own clothes to court would enable them to exercise the same autonomy and self-expression as youth attending court from their home or school.

Conclusion

Through this project, the YVC asked a few young adults in two facilities questions about their experience. These youth, currently making their way through adolescence in the justice system, expressed their thoughts through writing and conversation with the YVC. During these conversations, four themes arose with recommendations for how facilities can maintain high standards of care and make changes that will improve outcomes for young people. Throughout the responses, music, clothing choices, supportive relationships, and programming that expands their skills were valued for many reasons: a way to express oneself, a way to take responsibility for their presentation, a way to emotionally regulate, or something to do instead of trouble. The recommendations outlined in this report provide evidence that youth want supported autonomy. They have ambitions to succeed and want to be integrated into healthy families and communities.

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Further Reading

[Wisconsin Administrative Code, Chapter DOC 346: Secure Detention for Youth](#)

[Wisconsin Law Enforcement Standards Board Policy & Procedures Manual, Secure Juvenile Detention Officers Training Topics, Page 13.](#)