



TEXAS CRIMINAL
JUSTICE COALITION

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We would like to express our gratitude to the staff of the Giddings State School for opening their doors to us. Their willingness to allow us to survey youth proves their commitment to strengthening the provision of treatment and services for those in their care.

We also extend our sincerest appreciation to the youth who provided us feedback about their experiences with the system. Their perspective is critical to making real improvements in youth justice.

Lastly, we commend the work of Debbie Unruh, Ombudsman for system-involved youth in Texas, whose dedication to improving the lives of troubled and at-risk youth is a critical component of the youth justice reform movement.

MARCH 2012

The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition identifies and advances real solutions to the problems facing Texas' juvenile and criminal justice systems. We conduct policy research and analysis, form effective partnerships, and educate key stakeholders to promote effective management, accountability, and best practices that increase public safety and preserve human and civil rights.

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Message from the Executive Director

Dear practitioners, families, and advocates,

This is a critical but challenging time for juvenile justice reform in Texas. The new Juvenile Justice Department and its Board have an important, though daunting, task ahead of them. They are deciding questions related to the Department's funding, accountability, transparency, and rehabilitative goals, and their decisions now will have a profound impact on the futures of the 60,000 children referred each year to the Texas juvenile justice system. The Department cannot undertake this effort alone. Community-based practitioners, advocates, family members, policy-makers, and others are crucial to the full realization of the Department's mission.

Likewise, we must always consider the perspective of those who are directly impacted by the system – the youth. The goal of our survey, conducted through individual interviews with 115 youth at the Giddings state secure facility, is to help bring the voice of these children to the important conversations of juvenile justice reform now taking place across Texas.

The picture that emerges from our interviews offers both encouragement – the youth largely reported feeling safe and hopeful in the Texas juvenile justice system – as well as opportunities for improvement – for example, in family involvement, staff training, and youth violence against other youth. We have included specific findings and recommendations in this report, and the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition looks forward to working with advocates, practitioners, and others to build on those strengths and to address areas in need of improvement.

The responses of these youth also challenge some conventional wisdom. The youth identified education, treatment programs, and vocational training as the most helpful part of the juvenile justice system, suggesting these youth are highly motivated to succeed at school and are eager for the opportunity. They also reported frequent family visits at county facilities, suggesting these families want to be involved, and that the lack of family involvement at state secure facilities is a result of distance more than apathy.

These survey findings hold enormous potential, and I encourage all state and county agencies responsible for delinquent youth to take the opportunity this year to survey the youth in their care to learn from their experiences. I am confident that the patterns we report here accurately reflect the experience of these system-involved youth. In order to reduce interviewer biases, our survey team included eight interviewers, diverse in age, race, and sex. The youths' responses were thoughtful and remarkably consistent across interviewers.

We are deeply grateful to the Office of the Independent Ombudsman and the staff of the Giddings state secure facility for their support of this survey. Their openness inspires confidence, and we hope that this report will prove helpful to them in their work on behalf of Texas youth.



Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ana Yáñez-Correa". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Ana Yáñez-Correa, Ph.D.
Executive Director, Texas Criminal Justice Coalition

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Survey Methodology	1
Need For Further Research	1
Key Findings	3
Recommendations for Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD)	4
Safety: Survey Responses	6
Safety: Recommendations.	9
Hope: Survey Responses	10
Hope: Recommendations	12
Top Issues for Youth	13
Most Helpful for Youth’s Future	14
Least Helpful for Youth’s Future	15
If You Could Change One Thing.	16
References	17

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

This exploratory survey was conducted to provide general context for ongoing policy discussions.

The survey was conducted on January 4, 2012, at Giddings State School. All youth at the facility were invited to participate in the survey, and they were told the survey was voluntary, anonymous, and independent from the Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD). Ultimately, 115 youth chose to participate.

To reduce response bias, the interviews were conducted one-on-one in separate cubicles. The interview team was comprised of: 3 men and 5 women; 2 African American, 2 Latino, and 4 white; ages ranging from 20 to 44.

Youth were surveyed about their experiences in state secure facilities, as well as their previous experiences in county secure facilities.

In order to interview as many youth as possible, the survey was divided into short-answer and long-answer sections. 58 youth received only the short-answer section; 11 youth received only the long-answer section; and 46 youth received both the short- and long-answer sections. If a youth was unable to provide a clear answer on a question – for example, what county facilities he had stayed in – his response is omitted in the results.

To gauge the reliability of the self-reported responses, the issues of safety and programming were assessed using both open-ended and closed-ended questions (including scaled and ordinal questions). The consistency across questions suggests the broad patterns reported here are an accurate reflection of the youths' experience in the Texas juvenile justice system.

Each survey question is reprinted in the results section beginning on page 6. If a youth was asked to choose a response from an options list, those options are listed in the parentheses following the question.

NEED FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

To more fully understand the experience of youth in Texas, surveys should be conducted throughout the juvenile justice system. In particular, there is a pressing need to survey the girls at the Ron Jackson state secure facility, the youth with serious mental illness at the Corsicana facility, and the youth in the custody of county facilities across the state.

Additionally, surveys of staff at both state and county facilities will be essential as TJJD moves forward with its reforms. Our informal conversations with staff for this report provided important insight on the issues facing the juvenile justice system.

Finally, as this survey shows, family involvement is a critical component of successful reform. To better understand the obstacles to greater family involvement in lives of their loved ones, surveys of families with system-involved members should be conducted throughout the state.

KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ **The majority of youth reported feeling safe and hopeful in the Texas juvenile justice system.**
 - Only 5 percent reported not feeling safe in county secure facilities. 10 percent reported not feeling safe in state secure facilities.
 - 74 percent reported feeling “a lot of hope” about their plans for the future.

- ▶ **The youth identified education, treatment, interactions with staff, youth-on-youth violence, and family involvement as the most important issues facing them in the juvenile justice system.**
 - **Youth identified education, treatment programs, and vocational training as the most helpful in preparing them for their future after the juvenile justice system.** These responses suggest that these youth appreciate the value of education and treatment, and they are motivated to succeed when given the opportunity.
 - **Youth identified negative interactions with staff as the biggest barrier to their future success.** Youth similarly identified more staff training as the number one thing they would change about the juvenile system. Negative staff interactions increase misbehavior, hinder treatment, and create a perception of favoritism and unfair rule enforcement, youth report.
 - **Youth-on-youth violence is the most important issue to the surveyed youth.** This strong response was likely influenced by the large race/gang fight at the Giddings facility a month before the survey. Youth directly referenced that fight in several interviews; a month after the fight, the youth were still actively processing the traumatic event.
 - **Barriers to family involvement are a major issue for the surveyed youth.** Barriers to family involvement was second only to youth-on-youth violence when youth were asked about the importance of various issues, and second only to staff training when youth were asked what should be changed about the juvenile system.

- ▶ **The distant location of the surveyed facility imposes rehabilitation challenges, especially on family involvement, mentorship, and positive interactions with staff.**
 - Although positive family involvement significantly improves outcomes both during and after placement in secure facilities,¹ the youth reported that the long distance between home and the state secure facilities caused family visits to drop precipitously following commitment to the state secure facilities. 62 percent reported receiving visits at least once per week while in county facilities, but only 15 percent reported receiving visits at least once per week while in a state secure facility.
 - TJJJ reports that mentored youth in its state secure facilities achieve significantly better education and recidivism outcomes than non-mentored youth,² but staff at the surveyed facility noted during informal conversations that the relatively remote location of the facility hinders the recruitment and retention of mentors. As a result, only 7 percent of the surveyed youth reported having a mentor in state secure facilities, compared with 13 percent who reported having had a mentor at the county level.
 - Some staff at the surveyed facility noted during informal conversations that the long commute to the facility hinders their job performance, and youth reported that staff often seem angry when they arrive at work. Youth identified negative staff interactions as the biggest barrier to success and the number one thing they would change about the juvenile justice system.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEXAS JUVENILE JUSTICE DEPARTMENT (TJJD)

1. Expand support for local programs that keep kids in their home counties.

These survey findings highlight the structural advantages of local programs for staff, volunteers, youth, and families. **Policy-makers and TJJD should expand support for local programs by increasing Grant C diversion funding.**³

2. Increase staff training on positive interactions with youth and de-escalation skills.

From the perspective of the surveyed youth, negative staff interactions increase misbehavior, hinder treatment, and create a perception of favoritism and unfair rule enforcement. Based on informal conversations with staff and administrators, those negative interactions also increase staff turnover, injuries, and job dissatisfaction. Not surprisingly, the surveyed youth identified negative staff interactions as the greatest barrier to their rehabilitation. **Policy-makers and TJJD should support positive staff interactions by increasing funding for training programs at state and county facilities, such as Bexar County's successful Restraint and Seclusion Reduction Initiative training program.**

3. Build on the successful reduction of staff violence against youth at Giddings State School by implementing programs to reduce youth violence against other youth.

These survey findings reveal the lasting traumatic effects of youth-on-youth violence in secure facilities: A full month after a major gang/race fight at the facility, the youth frequently mentioned the event in the survey interviews. Research shows simply witnessing violence is traumatic for youth.⁴ The youth reported they had been in a high number of fights at the facility, often associated with gang activity, and they identified youth-on-youth violence as the most important issue to them. **Policy-makers and TJJD should reduce youth violence by increasing funding for: trauma counseling, especially following large fights; gang intervention programs designed for secure facilities; and staff training programs to address youth-on-youth violence.**

4. Increase funding for mentorship programs at both the state and county level.

Mentors are remarkably effective at preventing delinquency and reducing recidivism.⁵ However, only 7 percent of the surveyed youth reported having a mentor in state secure facilities, and only 13 percent reported having had a mentor at the county level. Many county departments report that mentor programs are usually at capacity. **TJJD should connect more youth with mentors by designating new prevention grants for county mentor programs, and policy-makers and TJJD should increase funding for mentor programs at all state secure facilities.**

► Increase support for families who want to be more involved with their children.

The surveyed youth reported frequent family visits at the county level, but only occasional family visits at the state secure facilities. Youth mentioned the high costs of travel as the main reason for the decrease in family visits at the state facility. The youth comments in the interviews suggested low family involvement at state secure facilities is negatively impacting treatment programs, safety, education, and reentry, in line with

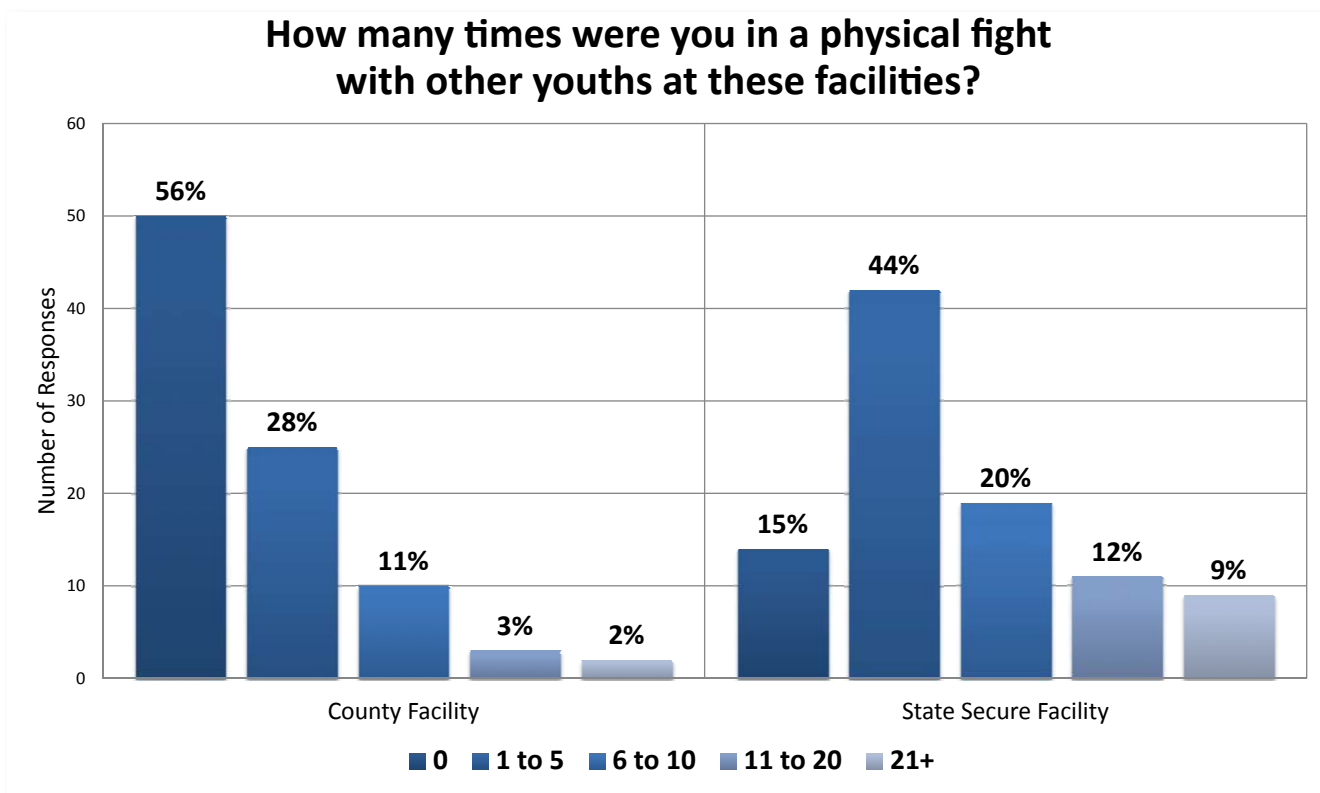
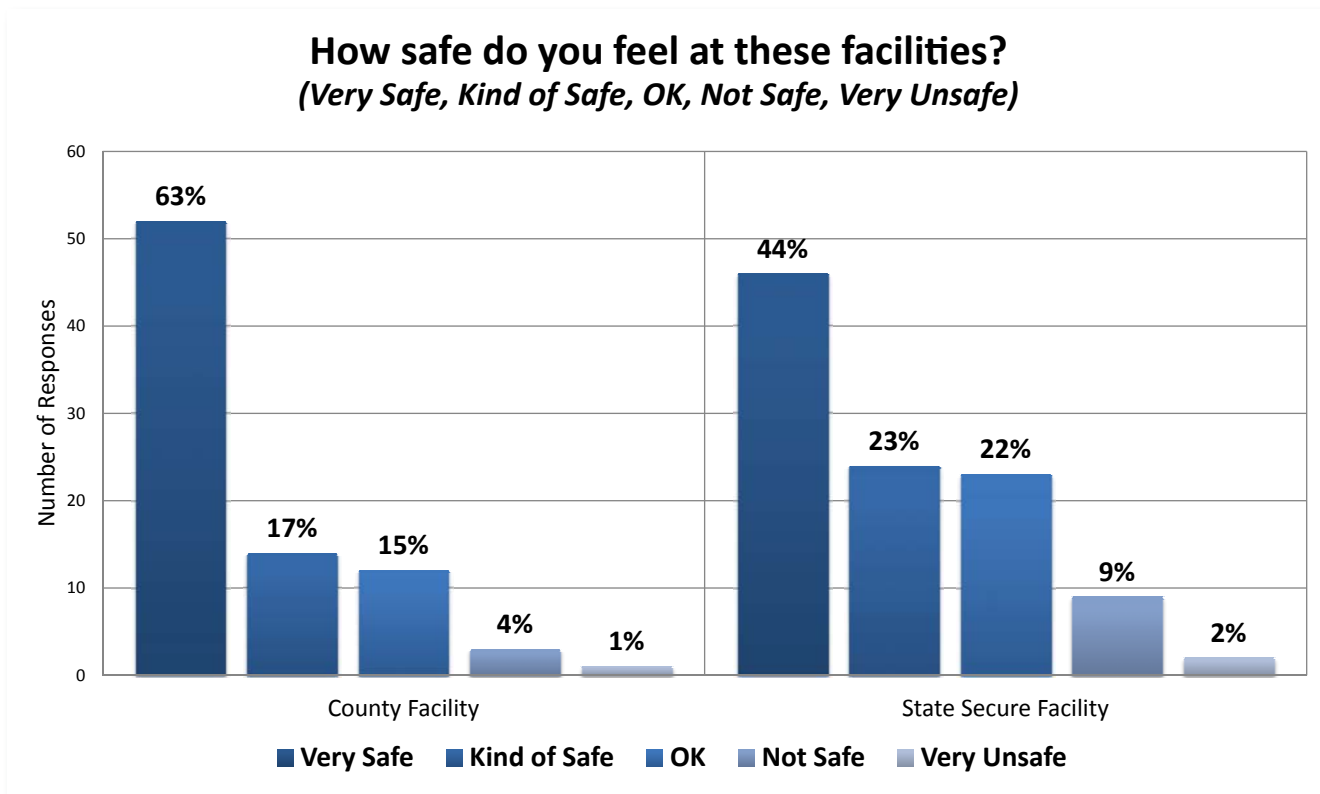
research on the issue.⁶ **TJJD should support family involvement by increasing the time youth are allowed to talk to family each week by phone and by increasing family participation in case plan meetings. Furthermore, policy-makers should help TJJD defray the cost of phone calls and travel for low-income families living far away from secure facilities.**

► **Expand reentry planning at both state and county facilities.**

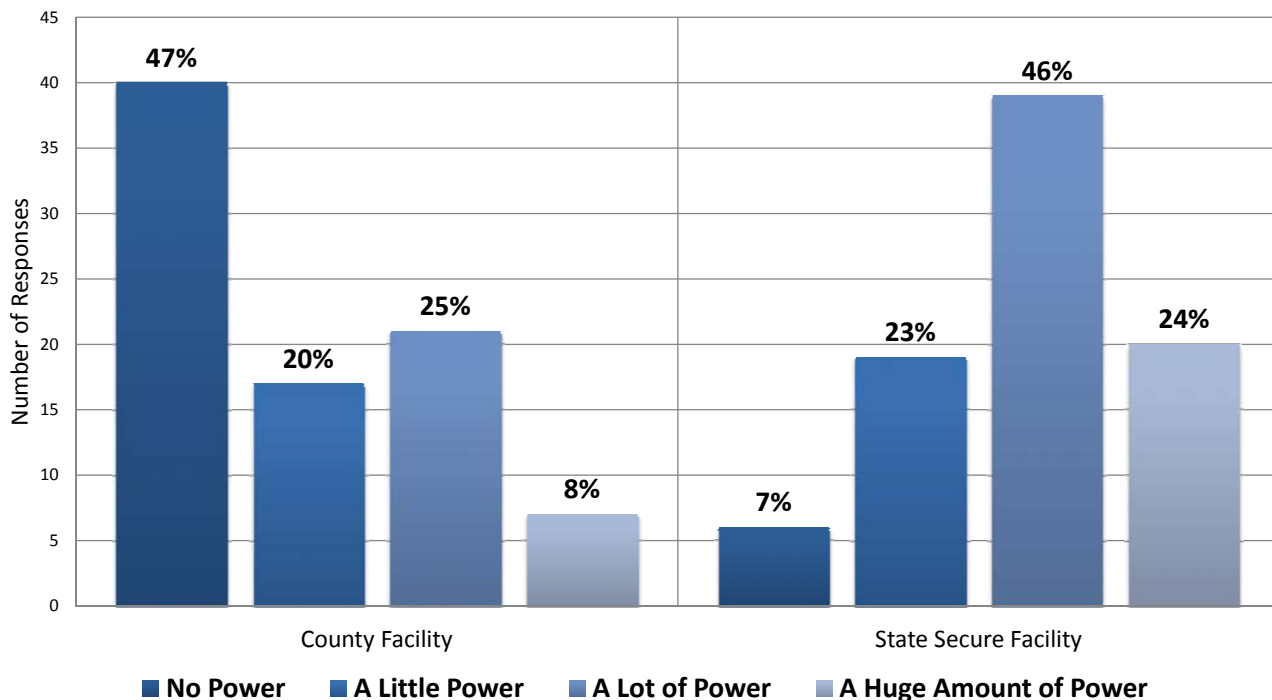
Reentry resources are a major concern for youth, who ranked the issue third in importance, behind only youth-on-youth violence and family involvement. The youth’s anxiety about returning to their communities underscores the central importance of reentry planning to their future success.



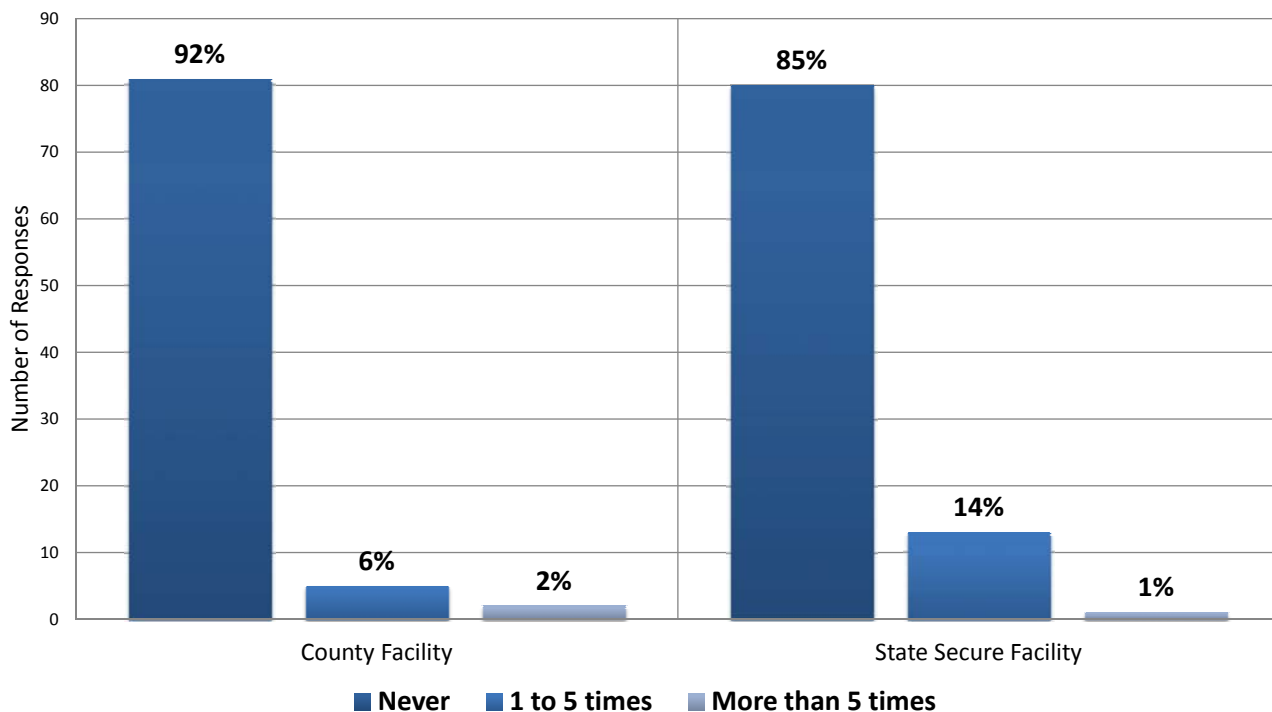
SAFETY: SURVEY RESPONSES



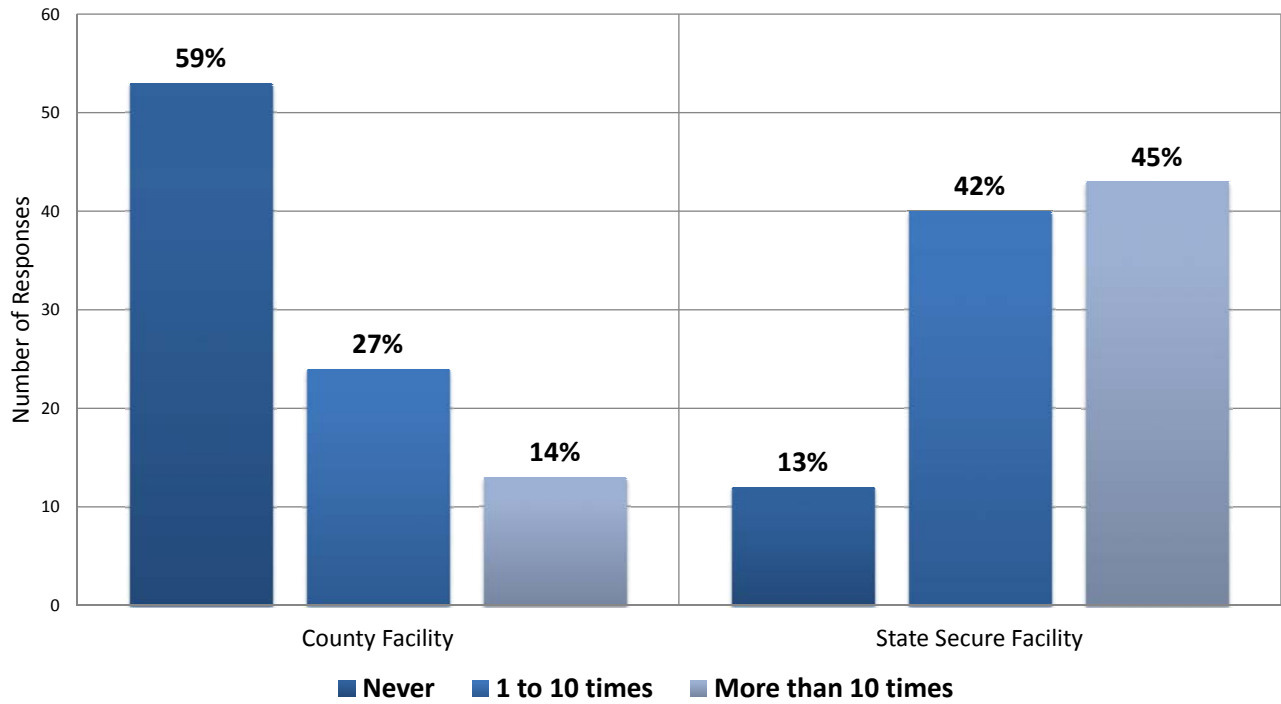
How much power did gangs have in those facilities?
(No Power, A Little Power, A Lot of Power, A Huge Amount of Power)



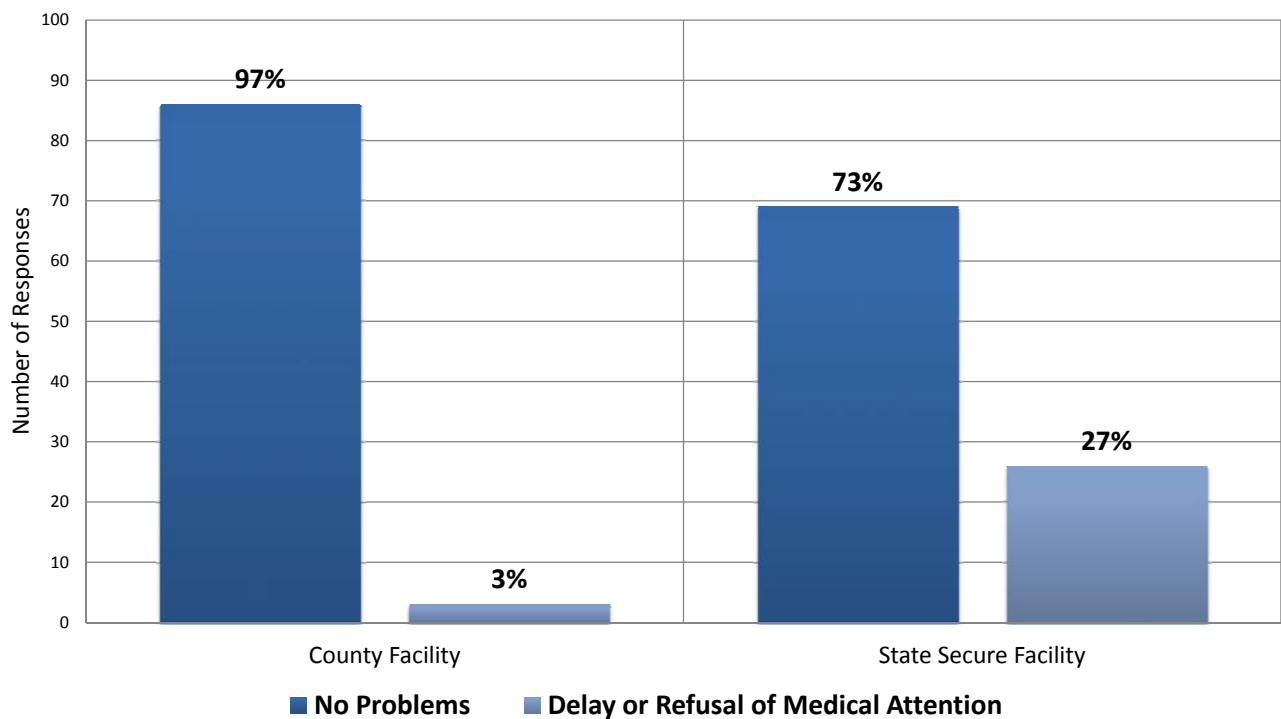
How many times were you hit by staff at those facilities?



How many times were you confined to your room as punishment for more than 24 hours at those facilities?



What problems, if any, did you have receiving health care or medications at those facilities?



SAFETY: RECOMMENDATIONS

Youth responses regarding safety at Giddings State School show a facility in transition: Staff violence against youth is relatively low, while youth violence against other youth remains a significant concern. This seems to be a familiar pattern for juvenile facilities in the middle of reforms. Bexar County, for example, documented a similar decrease in staff violence and increase in youth violence in the middle of its Restraint and Seclusion Reduction Initiative, followed by a precipitous decrease in both staff and youth violence as its reform efforts matured. That experience suggests Giddings has completed an important first step by reducing staff violence against other youth, and that Giddings should now press ahead and double down on reforms to reduce youth violence against other youth.

“The staff should be more aware of the weak. They don’t do anything about it, especially when they know a weakling is being pushed around. It’s not fair.” – Giddings youth

RECOMMENDATION 1: Build on the successful reduction of staff violence against youth at Giddings State School by expanding staff training programs to address youth-on-youth violence. Bexar County’s Restraint and Seclusion Reduction Initiative training program successfully reduced both staff-youth and youth-youth violence in its secure facilities.



The youth frequently mentioned gang-related violence in their survey interviews, including the large gang/race fight that occurred in late November 2011 at Giddings. A full month after that fight, the youth were still actively processing its emotional and psychological impact. The youths’ responses highlight both the role of gangs in youth-youth violence at the facility, as well as the continuing trauma caused by that violence.

“There’s too much fighting on this campus. Fights, riots, gangs – trying to see who’s tougher. It makes me feel less safe.” – Giddings youth

RECOMMENDATION 2: Increase trauma counseling for youth after fights, especially following riots. Implement gang intervention programs designed for secure facilities.



The survey responses suggest county programs have advantages that support higher safety outcomes for youth. Combined with the responses on family involvement, mentorship, and staff interactions, the youths’ perspectives on safety offer important guidance to TJJD as it implements the goals of SB653,⁷ including to “support the development of a consistent county-based continuum” of effective services, and to “locate the facilities as geographically close” as possible to family, necessary workforce, and services.

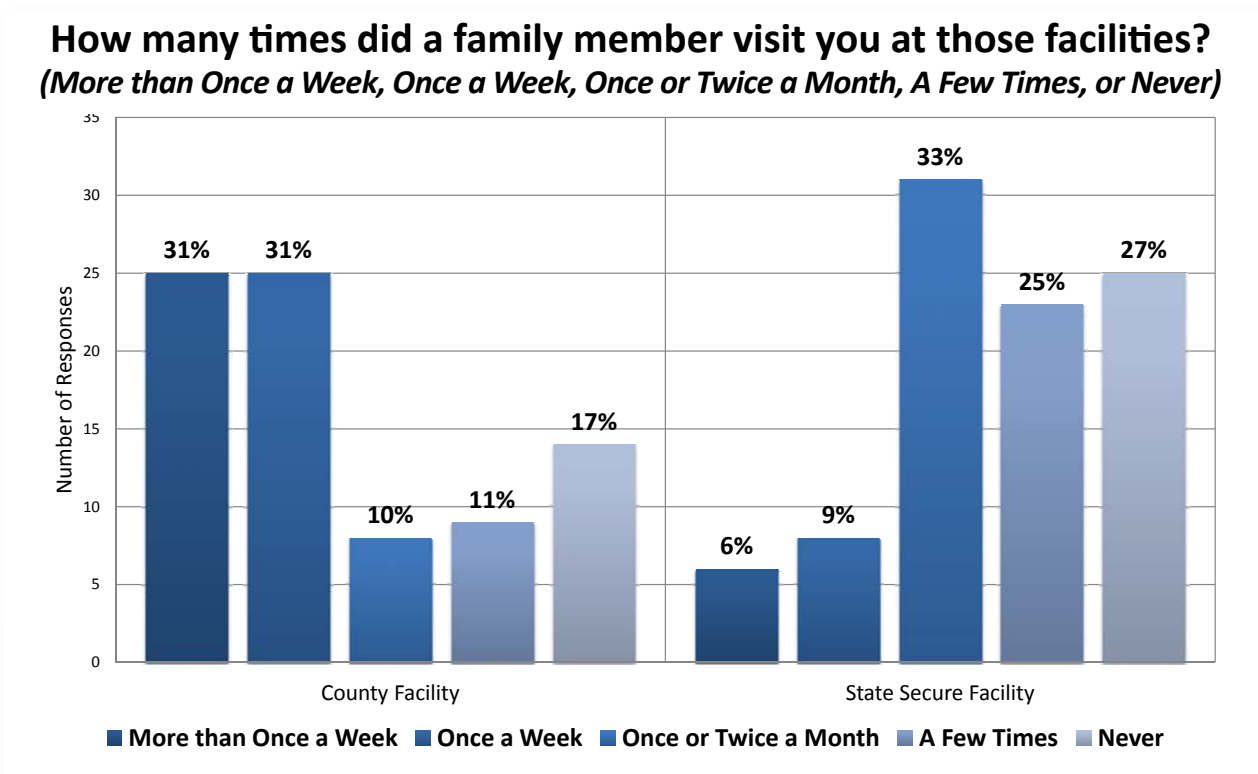
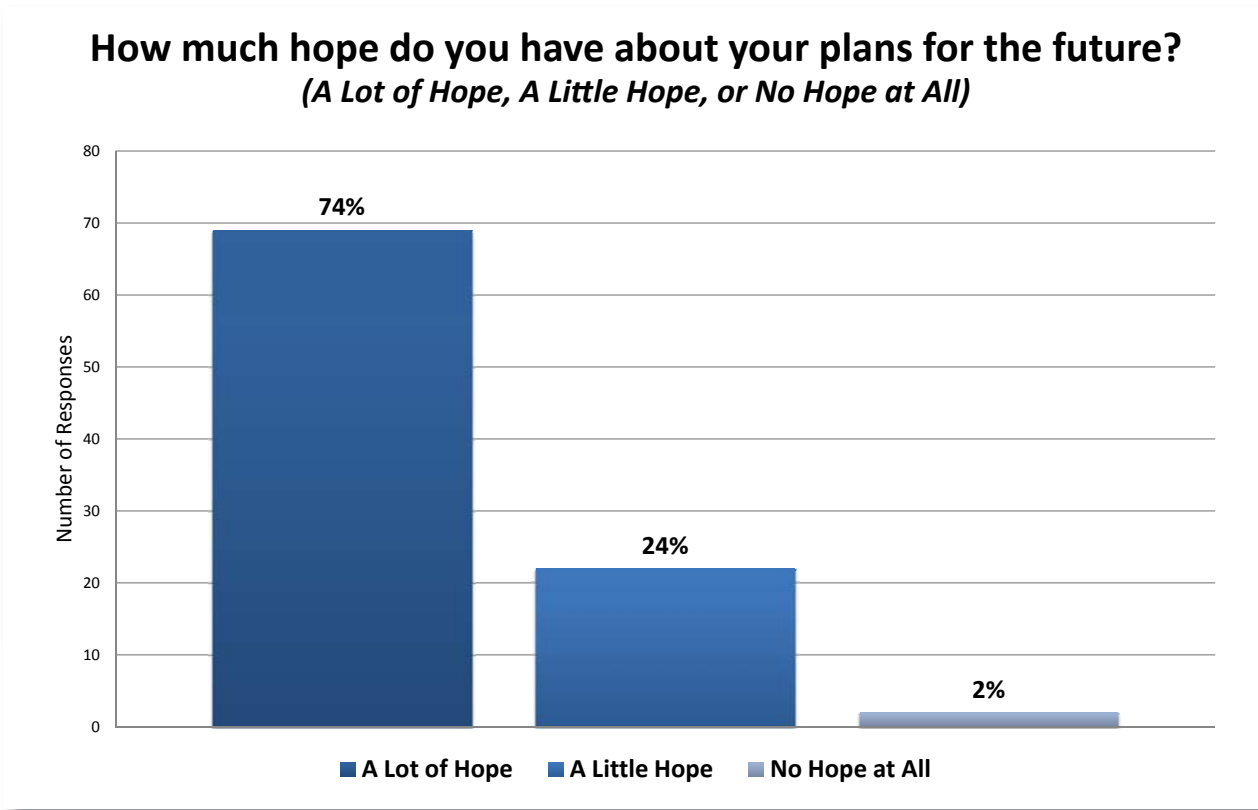
RECOMMENDATION 3: Expand support to county programs by increasing Grant C diversion funding.



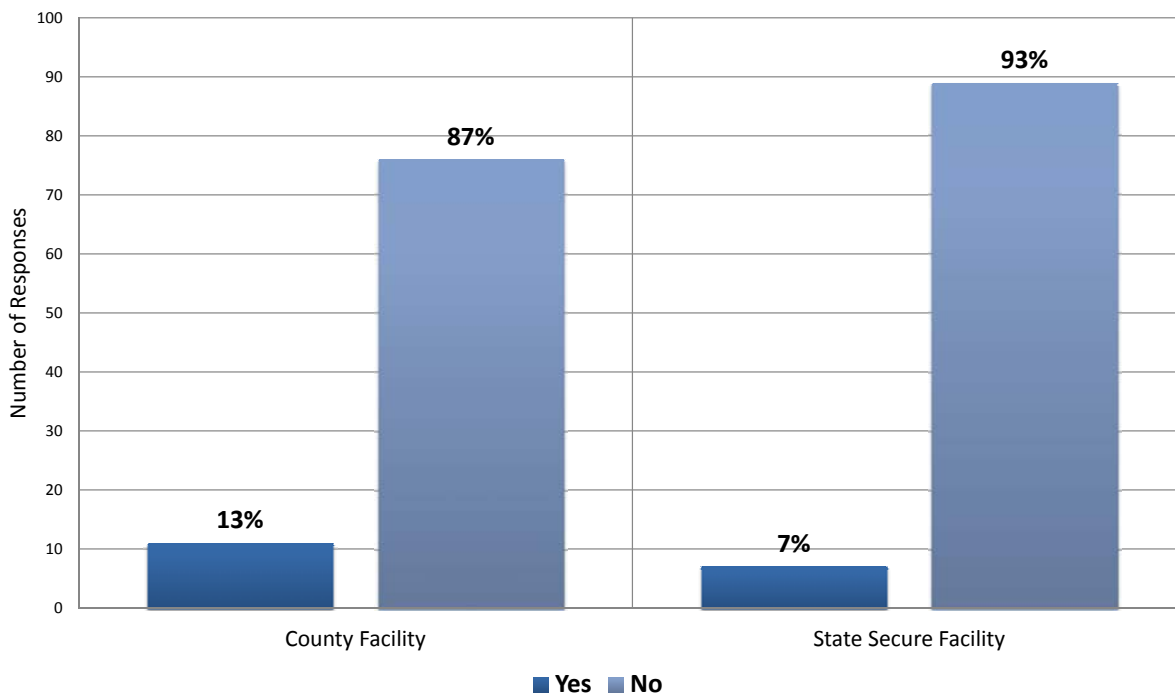
A significant number of youth reported a delay or refusal of medical attention at state secure facilities. They raised a wide variety of issues, ranging from a two-day delay to visit the infirmary for an injury that later required hospitalization, to denial of access to a youth’s inhaler during an asthma attack.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Review youth complaints regarding access to medical attention. As necessary, revise policies, training, and oversight to ensure youth receive timely access to appropriate medical attention.

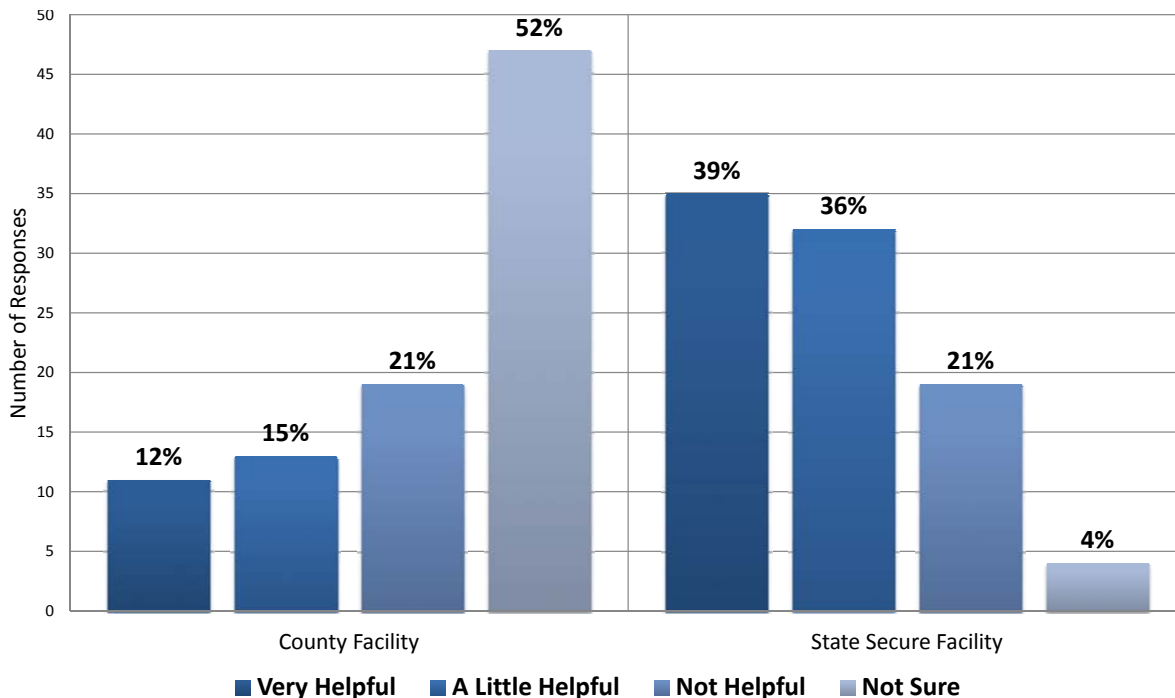
HOPE: SURVEY RESPONSES



Did you have a mentor while you were at those facilities?



How helpful was your individual case plan at those facilities? (Very Helpful, A Little Helpful, Not Helpful, Not Sure)



HOPE: RECOMMENDATIONS

“The staff pushes me to my limit, trying to help me with what I want to be. They helped me get my GED.” – Giddings youth

The youth at Giddings State School have very high hopes for their future. They feel empowered by their education, treatment programs, and vocational training, which the youth identified as the three parts of the juvenile justice system most helpful in preparing them for the future. The surveyed youth appreciate the value of education and treatment, and they are motivated by opportunities to succeed. When asked specifically about their individual case plans, most youth at Giddings said the plans had been helpful at the state secure facilities, though they were largely unsure about case plans at the county level.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Expand resources for youth case plans at the county level to ensure youth have the same opportunities to succeed in their communities as they do in state secure facilities.



“Without family support, it’s harder to succeed and be motivated to do better.” – Giddings youth

The survey responses show families want to be more involved in the juvenile justice system, but the remote location of state secure facilities is a major barrier to family involvement. The youth ranked family involvement as the second most important issue to them, and their comments in the interviews suggested low family involvement at state secure facilities is negatively impacting treatment programs, safety, education, and reentry.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Increase family participation in youths’ case planning. As necessary, revise visitation policies to support greater family involvement.



“I’ve never had a mentor. I want one.” – Giddings youth

Mentorship programs face significant challenges at both the state and county level, and few youth report having a mentor. County departments have noted that local mentor programs are often at capacity, and Giddings staff noted that state facilities face additional challenges in recruiting and retaining volunteer mentors because of the relatively remote location of the facilities. TJJJ has reported that those youth who do have mentors in state secure facilities achieve better outcomes in education and recidivism than non-mentored youth.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Increase access to mentors at state and county facilities by designating new prevention grants for county mentor programs and increasing funding for mentor programs at all state secure facilities.



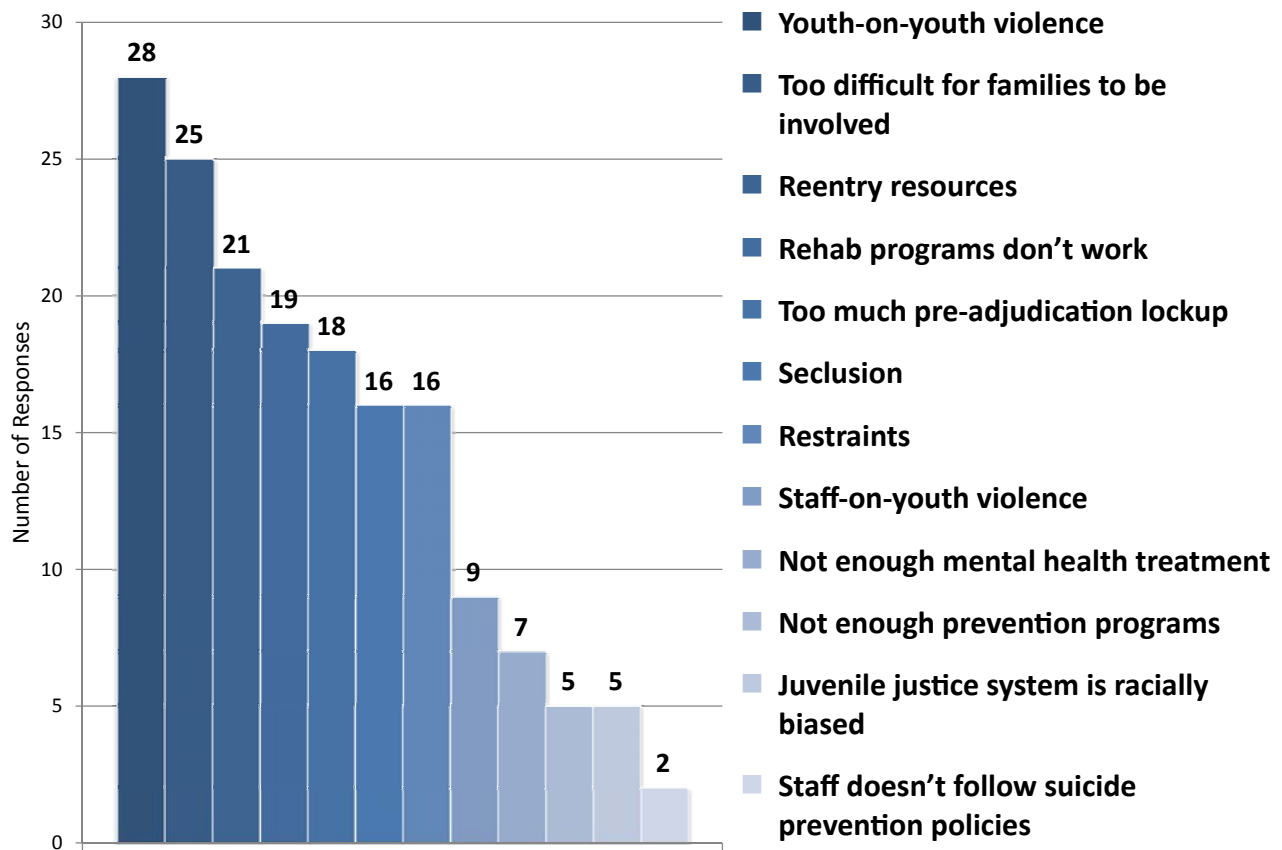
“They don’t prepare you for the changes and how to cope when you leave.” – Giddings youth

Reentry resources are a major concern for youth, who ranked the issue third in importance, behind only youth-on-youth violence and family involvement. The youths’ anxiety about returning to their communities underscores the central importance of reentry planning to their future success.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Expand reentry planning at both state and county facilities.

TOP ISSUES FOR YOUTH

From the following list of issues, which three are the most important to you?



**57 youth received this question. For more information, see Survey Methodology.*

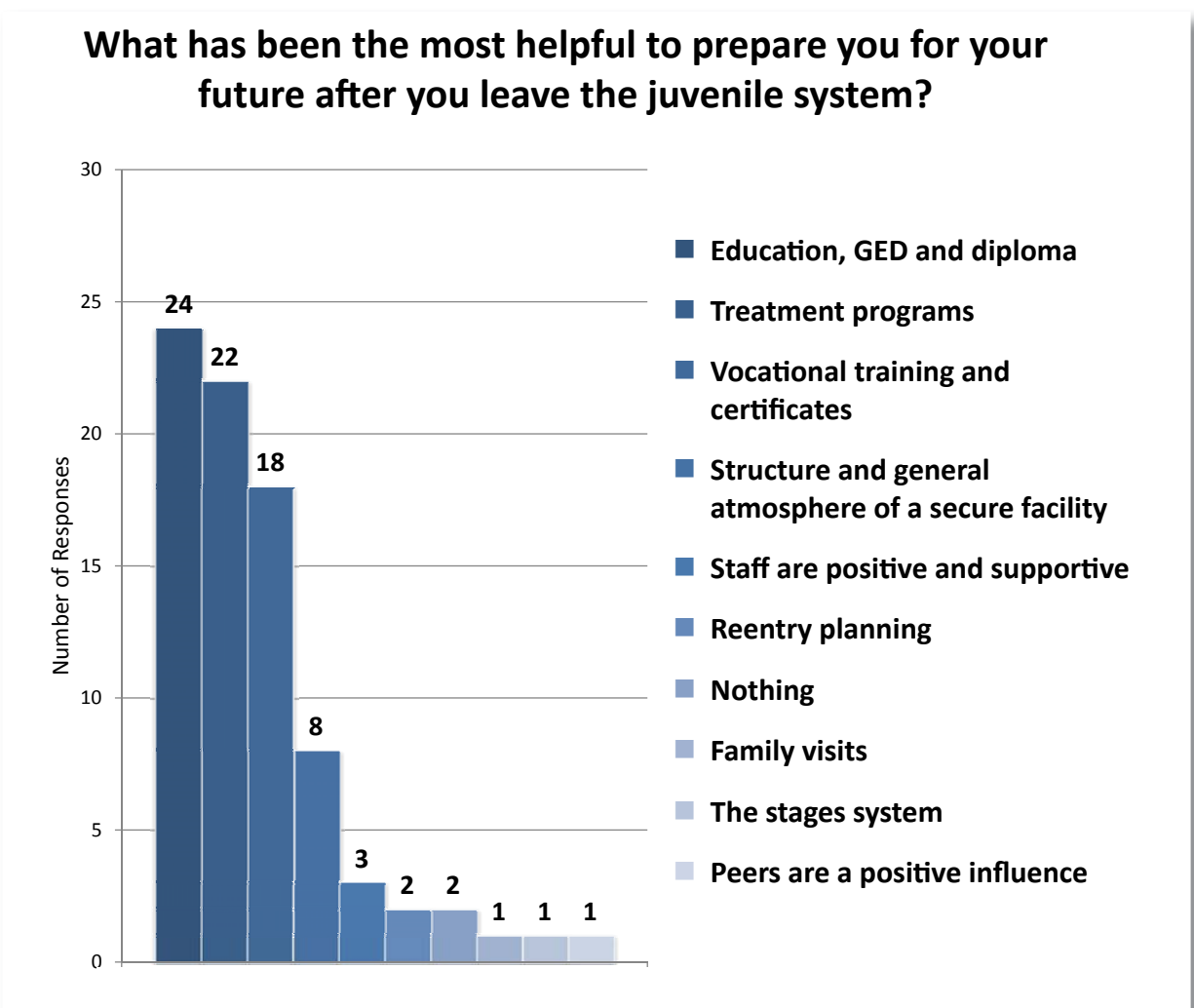
Representative quotes from youth interviews:

“Without so much violence, everything here would be safe and secure. There are a lot of threats from other youth.”

“Visitations don't happen enough. TYC should spend more money for family visits and less on televisions and PlayStations.”

“There's not enough resources to help me go back to my neighborhood so I can go home and be a better person. I'm afraid I'm going to come back to TYC if I don't get help after I leave.”

MOST HELPFUL FOR YOUTH'S FUTURE



**57 youth received this question. Some youth named more than one element.
For more information, see Survey Methodology.*

Representative quotes from youth interviews:

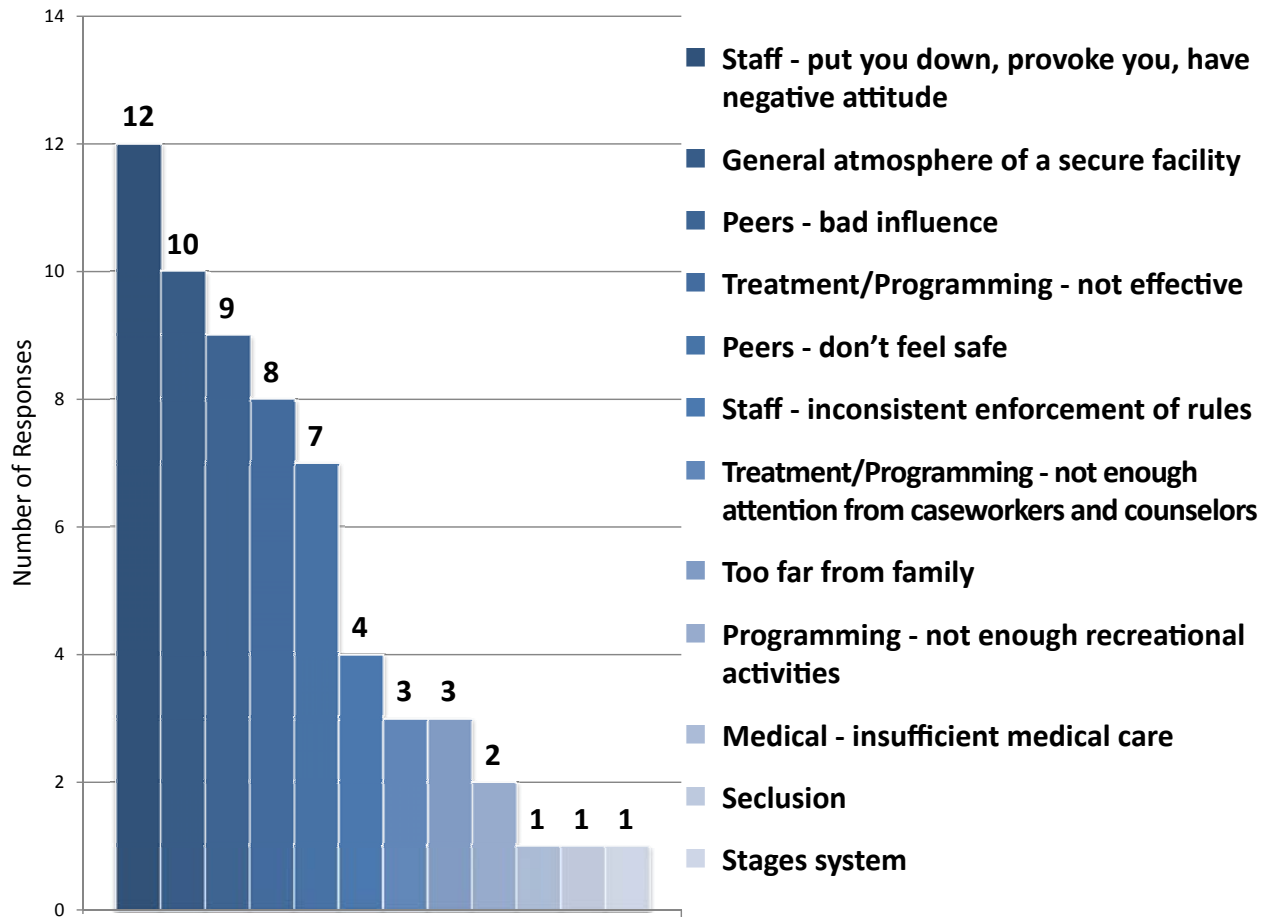
“Before, I wasn’t going to high school. Now I’m almost done with GED and I have a lot of credits.”

“Staying in treatment keeps you motivated and active. It teaches you how to control your anger and urges. The groups help you build empathy and respect.”

“I’ve finished certifications in woodshop and horticulture. That’s going to help me get a job.”

LEAST HELPFUL FOR YOUTH'S FUTURE

What has been the least helpful to prepare you for your future after you leave the juvenile justice system?



**57 youth received this question. Some youth named more than one element.
For more information, see Survey Methodology.*

Representative quotes from youth interviews:

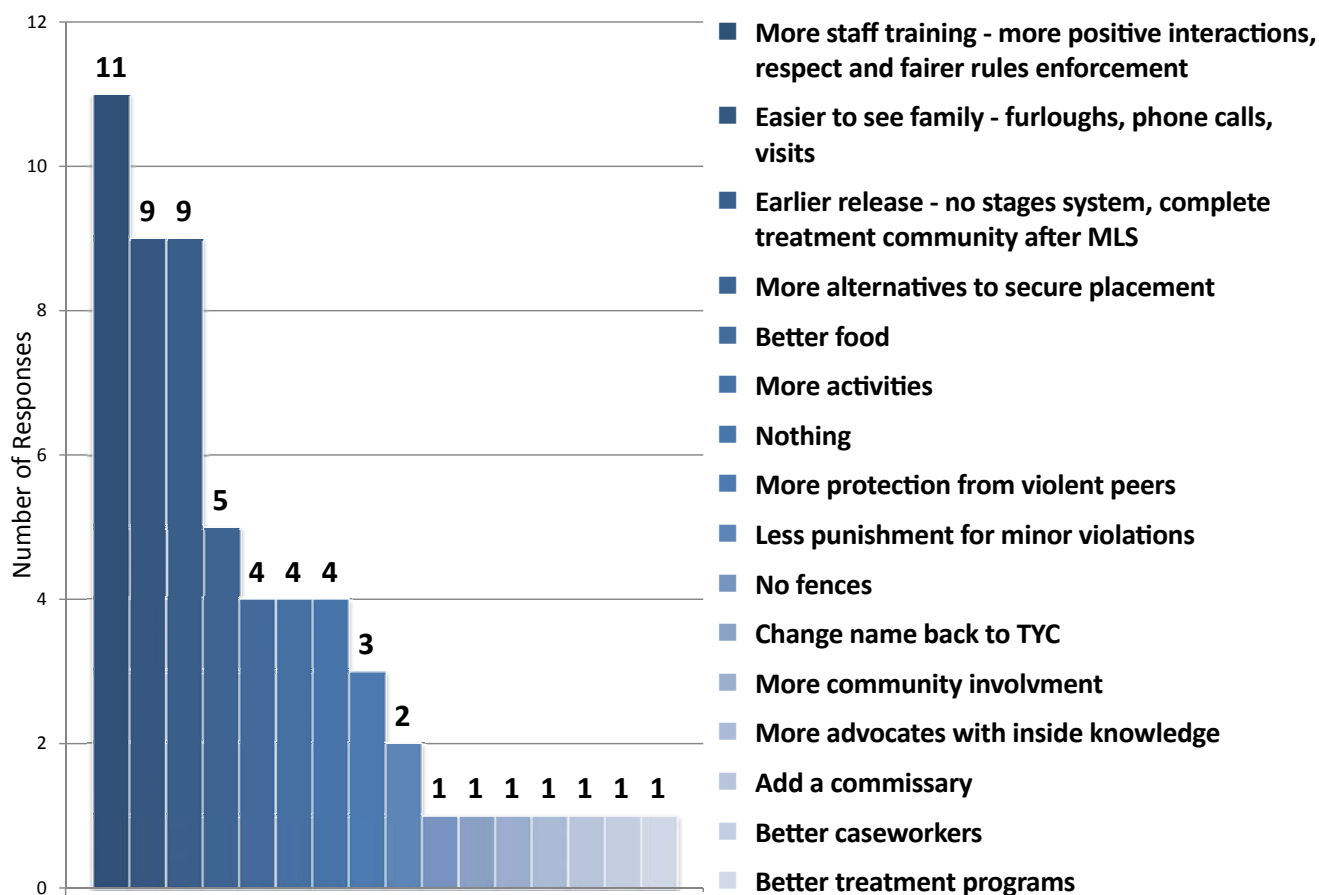
“Some staff put you down a lot. They have ups and downs. If they have problems, they take it out on us.”

“It’s hard getting to know this place. I get lost. I get confused in this place.”

“The guys here have a lot of negativity. I don’t listen to it. They try to intimidate you.”

IF YOU COULD CHANGE ONE THING...

If you were in charge and had the power to change one thing about the juvenile system, what would you change?



**57 youth received this question. Some youth named more than one element.
For more information, see Survey Methodology.*

Representative quotes from youth interviews:

"If I were in charge, I would have all of my employees show respect to everyone. Tell them not to talk down to us [system-involved youth]."

"I'd make it easier for kids to go home and see their families."

"I think we should leave after our minimum length of stay. If you don't have your treatment done, they should waive them, or you could do them in 'the free.'"

REFERENCES

- ¹ See, e.g., Ryan & Yang “Family contact and recidivism: A longitudinal study of adjudicated delinquents in residential care” (2005).
- ² Texas Juvenile Justice Department “Annual Review of Treatment Effectiveness” (2011) pp. 34-5.
- ³ Grant C diversion funding was first authorized by the 81st Texas Legislature (2009) to assist local juvenile probation departments in diverting youth from commitment in state secure facilities to community-based supervision.
- ⁴ See, e.g., Foy & Goguen “Community violence-related PTSD in children and adolescents” (1998).
- ⁵ See, e.g., McGill, Mihalic, & Grotmeter “Big Brothers Big Sisters of America: Blueprints for Violence Prevention” (1998).
- ⁶ See, e.g., Ryan & Yang “Family contact and recidivism: A longitudinal study of adjudicated delinquents in residential care” (2005).
- ⁷ SB 653, enacted by the 82nd Texas Legislature (2011), abolished the Texas Youth Commission and the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission and transferred the powers and duties of those agencies to the newly created Texas Juvenile Justice Department. SB 653 also established purposes and goals for the new agency to guide reform towards a more community-based rehabilitative juvenile justice system.



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