

Improving Education and Workforce Outcomes of Systems-Involved Youth: Building Consensus around Key Areas of Influence for Policy

Summary of AYPF Discussion Group

July 26, 2018

Washington, DC

On July 26, 2018, the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) convened a day-long discussion group of thought leaders across research, practice, and policy focused on building postsecondary education and workforce pathways for youth involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

To set the context for the discussion, Samaura Stone, Senior Policy Associate at AYPF, introduced some current issues with the potential to impact the future work in these fields. At the state level, 36 upcoming governors' races could significantly impact state education and youth policies, and could be a potential source of leverage for change. Federally, new funding streams are opening up for systems-involved youth through the implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) and similar legislation. Further, the Administration has repeatedly emphasized the importance of workforce development and signed an executive order to create the National Council for the American Worker, which could have implications for the development of apprenticeships, skills-training, and work-based learning programs for these youth.

Spark Presentation: Graduation Instead of Incarceration

Nigel Bowe, Program Director, The Choice is Yours, JEVS Human Services, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

In his presentation, Nigel Bowe discussed [The Choice is Yours](#) (TCY), a Philadelphia-based diversion program developed by [JEVS Human Services](#) for first-time, nonviolent drug offenders, typically aged 18 to 24. Bowe emphasized that TCY aims to empower students and boost their employability in order to increase their independence and quality of life. The program operates through multiple partnerships, notably with the District Attorney's office and the City of Philadelphia. It boasts an 86.5% completion rate, and graduates are significantly less likely to reoffend than non-graduates. Bowe discussed the innovative and holistic model employed by TCY, as well as some of the current challenges the program is facing.

Bowe noted that Philadelphia has the highest per-capita inmate population in the country and a 60% three-year recidivism rate. TCY participants have the opportunity to have their cases dismissed and potentially expunged upon completion of the program. Bowe emphasized the importance of TCY's four to six week-long orientation phase, in which the programs' case managers work directly with clients to diagnose and treat any underlying trauma that could prevent them from moving forward. While clients do have an individual life plan, Bowe stated that TCY has "switched the language" from goal setting to addressing these underlying issues.

Following the orientation, Bowe expanded upon the 12 month enrollment phase which consists of employment, education, or work-skills training based upon the client's needs. TCY offers paid employment experience with additional financial incentives to clients, because many would not otherwise have these opportunities due to their criminal history. Bowe stressed this point, stating that poor public perception of youth with criminal backgrounds presents issues for funding and employment. Bowe noted that clients are often turned away from work because employers widely see their

backgrounds as a problem. He also noted that “states have money available, but don’t fund these programs.”

Discussion

Respondent: Isaac Hammond-Paul, Deputy Director, DC ReEngagement Center, Office of the State Superintendent of Education

Key themes:

- Addressing clients’ underlying trauma before setting long-term goals
- The importance of a navigator figure and staff capacity to engage with youth
- Data collection and data-sharing challenges relating to vulnerable youth populations

Following the presentation, Isaac Hammond-Paul moderated a group discussion on issues raised by Bowe. He opened by mentioning that the DC ReEngagement Center, which serves DC youths aged 16-24 with no high school credential and who are unenrolled in school, follows a similarly holistic model to TCY. The first part of the discussion focused on a “wraparound” approach to addressing all of the clients’ various needs, rather than having separate agencies address separate issues. One participant mentioned the importance of a “Chief of Staff” role for youth, arguing that youth “are provided referrals and phone numbers and expected to do everything themselves on top of competing time demands. We need to shift this burden to the agencies.”

There was general agreement that a navigator needs to be present to coordinate the different services that systems-involved youth need to access. However, opinions differed regarding how many adult figures should be involved. One participant mentioned a client who stated that they’d rather have no caseworkers than a large number. Another participant cited data indicating that in order to become reconnected, young men of color needed an average of five interventions over the course of two years with roles played by numerous adults. “A navigator is definitely needed, but we should not limit the adult involvement.”

The discussion turned to the importance of making sure all staff working with disconnected youth are capable of serving these populations. A few participants mentioned ways in which their organizations are utilizing trauma-informed care and training programs to ensure that all staff are equipped with the tools necessary to “know where the kids are coming from in order to help.”

The group closed the discussion by addressing some of the challenges in data collection and data sharing regarding systems-involved youth. Two main areas emerged: Data that youth provide about themselves, and data produced through rigorous studies on programs and practices. While many alternative data sources exist, many are not utilized due to barriers between systems. Ethical concerns over this data sharing were also discussed, including the challenges of “bad actors” and privacy. One participant stated that “when we talk about sharing data, it needs to be youth-centric.” Another cautioned that data surrounding effectiveness should not be generalized, as it can be hard to pinpoint exactly which youth require which supports.

Aligning Juvenile Justice Programs with State and Federal Policies

Simon Gonsoulin, Project Director, National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth Who are Neglected, Delinquent, or At-Risk

Simon Gonsoulin presented some of the current trends in the interaction between state and federal policies regarding education in the juvenile justice system. He focused on [Title I, Part D](#) of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). He focused in on the two sub-parts of the legislation that provide funding for the enhancement of state juvenile justice programs and local education agencies (LEAs) respectively. States can receive funding for these programs based on a headcount of the populations they serve. Gonsoulin indicated that there are some states who are very effective at using their funding to produce good outcomes for students, and some states fund programs that do not reliably produce the same outcomes.

Gonsoulin then described an important change in ESSA, which he said creates a “two-way street” with shared responsibility for the youth when it comes to record exchange and rapid reenrollment. Rather than placing the full responsibility for the transfer of students back to the community school on juvenile justice facilities, ESSA modifications require the facilities to coordinate with the LEAs that their students will enter. “This puts everyone on the hook for the youth’s educational success” including state education agencies, who must track the progress of youth who are justice involved.

To illustrate the ways in which states are innovatively using these federal funds, Gonsoulin gave the following examples:

- [Washington State](#) has an education advocate initiative that utilizes Title I, Part D, both Subparts 1 and 2, funds to develop strong relationships between youth in the juvenile justice system and LEAs. This has produced increased reenrollment as well as positive attendance and achievement outcomes.
- Seven states across the country have implemented multi-tiered systems of support (PBIS) to better address academic and behavioral concerns of youth who are in the system.
- The [Northern Virginia Juvenile Detention Center School](#) provides quality staff, project based learning, and resources such as physical activities and library services. These services are not often seen in juvenile justice education programs and may help students make academic progress even if their length of stay is fairly short.

Discussion

Key themes:

- Lack of reliable student achievement data from juvenile justice facilities
- Concerns with the implications of headcount-based funding

Following Gonsoulin’s presentation, he asked participants for their input on how correctional education policies can be used to make juvenile justice education a top priority of juvenile justice systems or state and local educational agencies? One participant mentioned that this is difficult to address considering that there is considerable error in the current reporting on student achievement in juvenile justice facilities, and that there is little knowledge of the populations that these facilities actually serve both of which may impact progressive policy development promoting quality education programming.

Another participant pointed out that there has been recent success in reducing the amount of youth that are in juvenile justice facilities, asking if “given the trends against youth in detention, what does that mean for using money in school districts?” This highlighted a problem with the headcount-based funding of Title I, Part D: Gonsoulin added that “states reducing the population in long-term juvenile facilities are being indirectly penalized, and those that aren’t lowering the number of youth in secure

settings may actually be drawing down more dollars due to the head-count process ...change takes time to happen.”

Spark Presentation: Employment and Empowerment (E2) Peer Support Training

Kat Keenan, Deputy Director, Foster Forward, Works Wonders Program, East Providence, Rhode Island

Kat Keenan began her presentation by describing the [Works Wonders](#) initiative as “employer cultivation:” a method of educating employers to be able to understand where systems-involved youth come from. Works Wonders began as a demonstration project from a Children’s Bureau bid. The agency was looking to address a gap in Rhode Island’s youth employment rates: 70% of the state’s 19 year olds were unemployed, in comparison to 20% of its 16-24 year olds overall. The youth centers at the time were failing to increase youth employment rates, which Keenan attributed to their unfamiliarity with the trauma and complexity that these populations face. Works Wonders tackles this problem by improving employer competencies and building youth work readiness.

The Works Wonders model was developed, implemented, and currently operates with youth voice and participation at the center. Through a five step process, the voluntary program builds relational competency, career goals and work experience with the end goal of employment or further education. Keenan stressed the importance of the voluntary aspect of this work, stating that youth have to take the initiative on their own in order to build self-efficacy and determination.

Keenan added that Works Wonders operates with a variety of federal, state, and private partners to best provide a range of services. Research has shown the program to be largely successful at bridging the skills gap for young people, which Keenan attributed in part to its focus on building relational competencies. Despite this success, however, Works Wonders continues to navigate challenges due to the constant tension between providing individual youth the time they need to succeed and the quarterly reporting expectations of outcomes by funders.

Discussion

Respondent: Susan Punnett, Executive Director, DC Family and Youth Initiative

Key themes:

- The importance of measuring the factors that go into foster youth success, rather than just their outcomes
- Holding both individual programs and larger systems accountable for good outcomes
- Providing incentives for employers to invest in systems-involved youth

Following the presentation, Susan Punnett moderated a group-wide discussion. She began by highlighting how essential it is for youth involved with the foster care system to build soft skills, but also that there is no consensus on how to define or measure these skills. This can be a challenge for analyzing the results of programs that work with foster youth. Punnett asked how success should be defined for these programs given that the measurement of these skills is so unclear.

Participants agreed that soft skills are essential to positive outcomes for foster youth, and that the development of these skills is a very personalized process. One participant mentioned that a dual-reporting system could be used to allow structured results to be produced in terms of reporting outcomes data, but be flexible enough to allow for individuals to progress at different rates.

The discussion brought up the distinction between measuring inputs versus measuring outputs. It was acknowledged that the current system relies very heavily on outputs such as test scores and employment rates, rather than what went into producing these outcomes. One participant said that input measurements can be much more valuable, as they can measure gaps in treatment by identifying how many youth are treated for their specific needs.

It was also mentioned that measurements should not only be used to keep individual programs accountable, but to hold larger systems to these standards as well. Multiple participants brought up the ability of employers to “cherry pick” who joins the workforce based upon preference, which can dramatically shift the outcomes of systems-involved youth. To counteract this, it was suggested that employers need to be incentivized to take the risk of hiring these youth. One participant shared an example of this working successfully when states provide tapering wage reimbursement to small businesses who hired systems-involved youth. Another participant stressed the importance of building awareness among employers of the situations facing these young people, regardless of what incentive is provided.

Aligning Foster Care Programs with State and Federal Policies

John Sciamanna, Vice President of Policy, Child Welfare League of America

Key themes:

- The challenges and limitations of FFPSAs evidence-based requirement
- Finding flexibility to innovate within the existing system

John Sciamanna gave an overview of current federal policies providing funding streams for state foster care programs, focusing primarily on the new [Family First Prevention Services Act](#) (FFPSA). Sciamanna stated that this legislation is primarily focused around a service component, which provides preventative services for children who are candidates for foster care. These candidates – a definition that HHS has not clarified – may receive unlimited mental health, substance abuse, and/or family skills services for 12 months. The services must all be evidence-based, a standard that is limited to three categories: well-supported, supported, or promising. Sciamanna noted that while half of FFPSAs funds are designated for well-supported programs, only a few programs actually meet this standard.

Sciamanna also noted the quality residential treatment program provision of FFPSA, which attempts to address the issue of group homes by setting a very high eligibility bar for these programs. However, he noted that these rigorous standards have made it so that some children are no longer eligible for quality residential treatment programs (QRTP). While it was expected that these youths would be placed into better prepared foster care settings, these settings are scarce.

Funding through the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (Chafee) is another channel through which states receive an allocation for programs that help youth transition out of foster care. Chafee provides Education Training Vouchers (ETV) and training for youth up to five years after they leave the system, which, Sciamanna said, is an incentive for states to extend foster care services to age 21. However, only 25 states have taken this action, and the states that have used it have stipulated varying conditions attached to staying in foster care. Sciamanna cited California as an example of a state with flexible conditions; under its policy, youth may exit foster care at 18, but elect to return anytime between 18 and 19.

The group expressed concerns over FFPSAs heavy emphasis on evidence, noting that the current evidence base for these programs is very minimal. There were also concerns over the costs required to meet the stringent FFPSA evidence requirements, which involve conducting expensive randomized control trials (RCTs). One participant stated that this introduces an “ethical quandary”: it could lead to effective programs losing support because they are unable to conduct the necessary studies, and programs that do conduct studies risk withholding effective treatments from control groups that require these services. This led to a discussion of how research standards can be shifted in order to both measure effectiveness but also ensure that more programs are able to conduct these evaluations. Such a system would allow for the innovation of treatment methods while also holding these treatments accountable to a standard of effectiveness.

Building Consensus around Key Areas of Influence and Effective Messaging

Participants broke into small groups based upon their expertise in the juvenile justice or foster care systems. They discussed the following questions on how to best address policymakers regarding these populations, and what changes to policy they would like to see going forward:

1. What’s working and what’s not?
2. What language and framing should be used to address policymakers on these issues?
3. What is your top system-change recommendation?

Juvenile Justice Group

Leader: Kisha Bird, Director of Youth Policy, Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)

Key themes:

- Prioritization of the continuity of supports in the juvenile justice system and beyond, beginning with a formal acknowledgement of the trauma faced by these youth
- Expanding diversion programs to address the underlying issues faced by youth who have committed offenses
- Rethinking the connection between school and prison: expand data sharing, rethink school discipline
- Economic framing to drive policy change: the money is already being spent, so ensure that it’s spent wisely
- Frame youth in a way that humanizes them to policymakers

Foster Care Group

Leader: Thomas Showalter, Executive Director, National Youth Employment Coalition

Key themes:

- Rethinking the system: providing supports to older foster youth that allow them to transition out of the system successfully, rather than just letting them stay in a broken system for a longer period of time
- Finding ways that higher education can address the trauma and other special needs facing foster youth: help youth succeed by addressing barriers to success
- Humanize the youth to policymakers: action is more likely if those driving change can empathize
- Economic framing to show change as an investment in future economic growth
- Policy recommendations included:

- Federally funded transitional housing
- A “Chief of Staff” navigator to coordinate youth supports
- Inter-agency collaboration
- Extending foster care to age 21 in all 50 states
- Developing a parenting approach for older youth that allows for autonomy and growth
- Extending foster care to age 21 was agreed upon as the first step to further system change

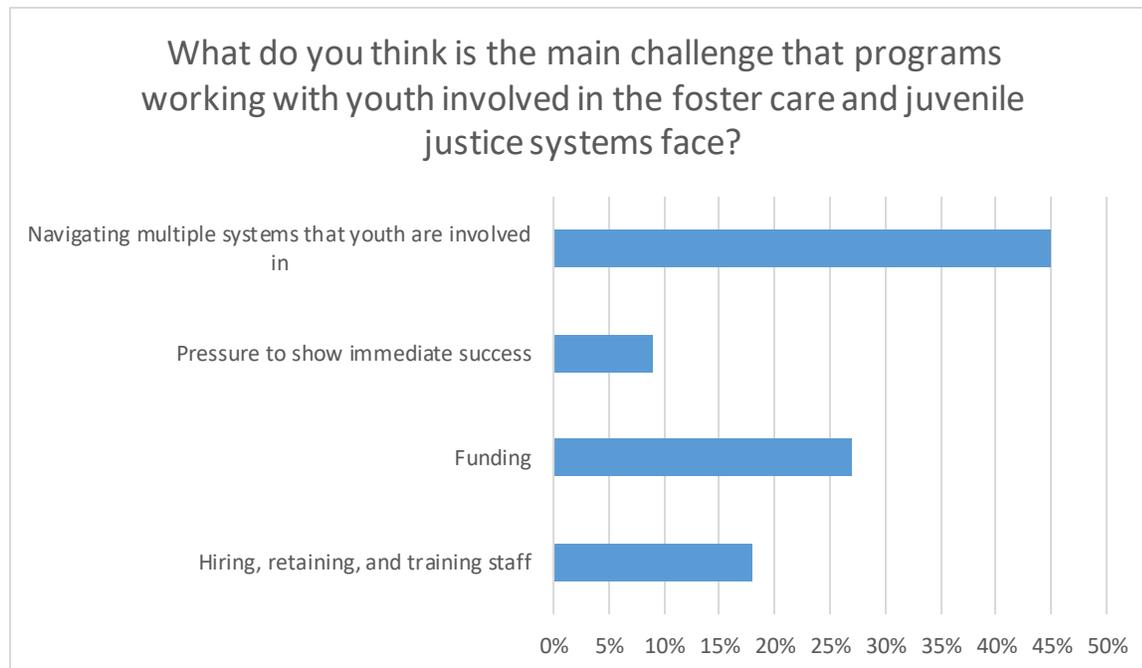
Key Takeaways and Alignment

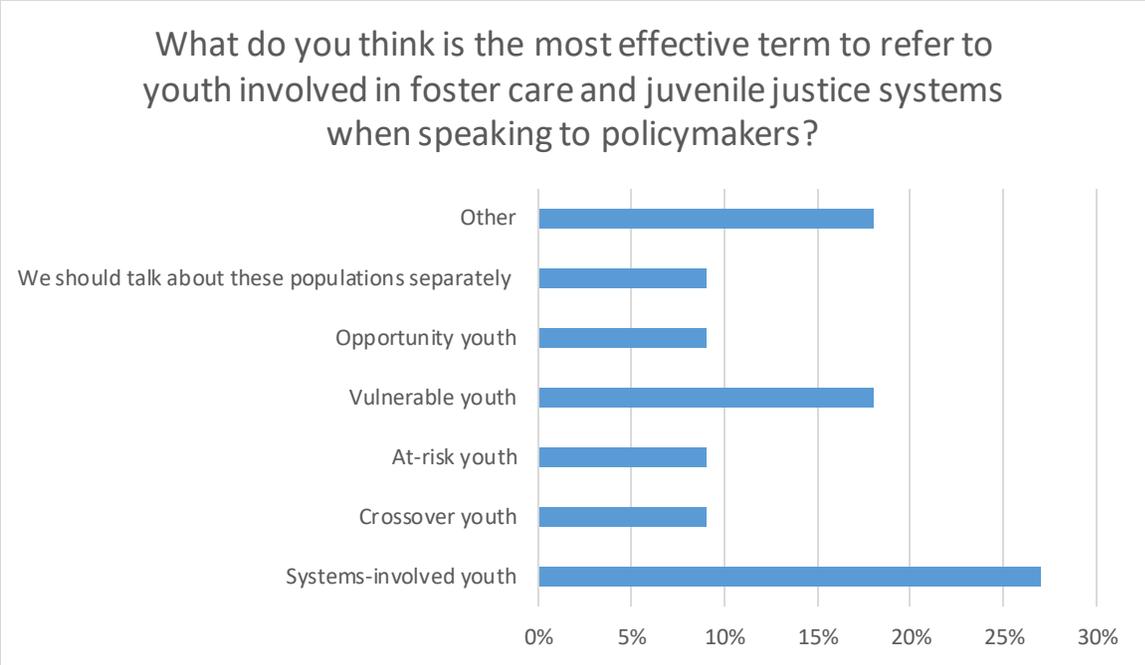
Following the small group discussions, the group reconvened to discuss any overlap that occurred within their discussions. One participant noted that both discussions were very focused within each respective system, and that it could be valuable to address issues that extend beyond these systems but still affect systems-involved youth.

Both groups agreed that work needs to be done to address adolescents in these systems separately from children. This would help them build the skills necessary for success outside of these systems, rather than leaving them without any of the capacity needed to do well. There was also agreement about the need for consistent, adult support as youth navigate these systems, as well as insurance that the adults working with these youth have the capacity to do so. One participant mentioned that for both systems this entails the humanization of these youth at least in part through increasing awareness of the trauma they face.

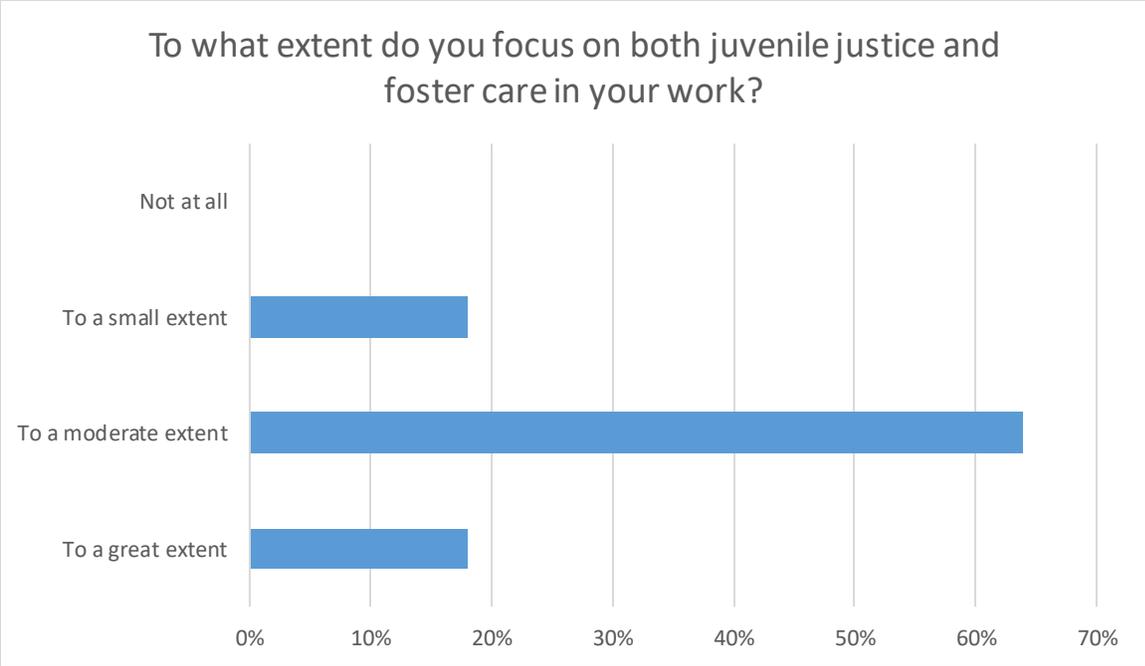
Polling Exercise

Participants were asked to respond to questions regarding the discussion topics of the day. The poll results are shown below:

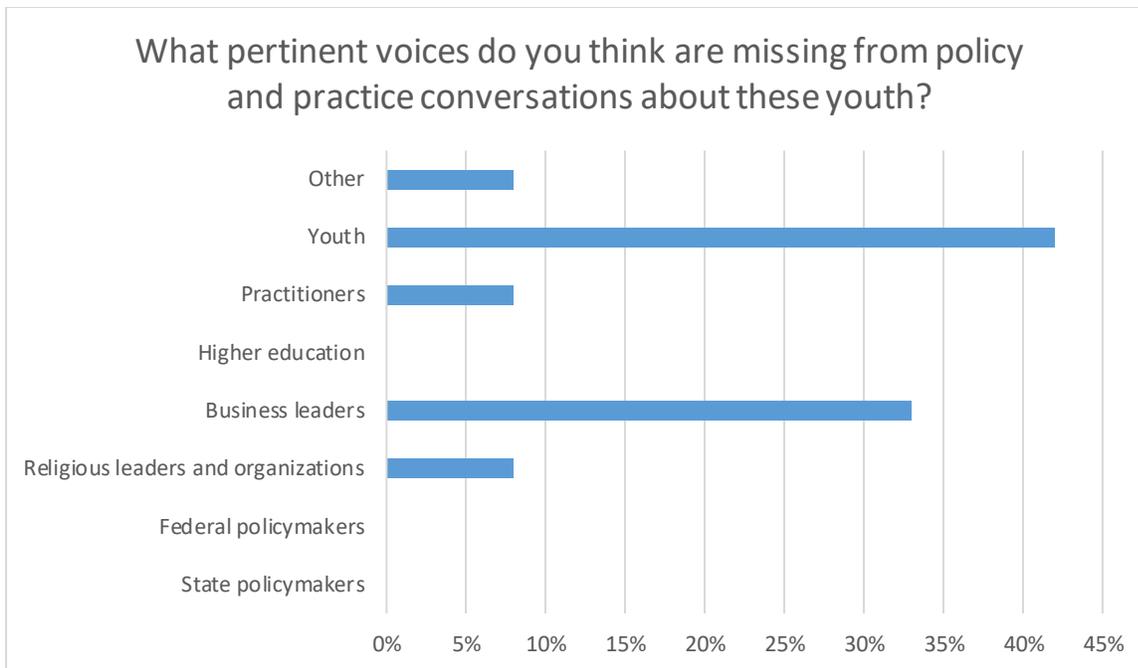




Those that answered “other” expressed concerns about discussing “foster youth” as opposed to “youth in foster care,” as this distinction could serve to “create victims” and thus be counterproductive. The group added that these terms are often employed for different audiences for different reasons, and that the use of multiple terms may be justified for this reason.



To explain the fact that no participants selected “not at all,” it was mentioned that those working with these populations have collectively learned that keeping them separate ended up producing more problems. Due to the similarities in the challenges facing youth in juvenile justice and foster care, and that many systems-involved youth are in both the foster care and juvenile justice systems, all agreed that collaboration is necessary to produce lasting impacts.



One participant noted that there is a significant time component attached to bringing new voices into this work. Outside fields need to learn about the issues, vocabulary, and other factors involved in juvenile justice and foster care systems before they are able to be active participants in the conversation.

Conclusion

This discussion convened a diverse group of experts in the juvenile justice and foster care spheres who were able to share their take on the challenges facing this body of work, as well as recommendations for the next steps. The presentations highlighted some innovative and effective approaches to helping these youth populations achieve success, as well as navigating the existing policy landscape. Over the course of the day, a few important themes emerged.

Individualized support

Participants frequently cited that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to helping systems-involved youth achieve, as each case brings a unique experience that needs to be treated in an individual way. Regardless of the treatment, youth should remain at the center. Whatever form this manifests in, participants agreed that youth should be supported throughout the process with consistent adult support and navigation.

Data collection and input measurement

The discussion repeatedly mentioned significant limitations on reliable data available about youth involved with the juvenile justice and foster care systems. This was cited as an issue regarding outcomes data as well as information surrounding the inputs going into treatment. This presents an issue for accountability, as well as in light of the heavy emphasis that new federal funding legislation places on evidence.

Increased awareness

Whether within a specific program or within larger societal systems, participants repeatedly cited a need for education among those who interact with system-involved youth. Within specific programs, staff

should be aware of the challenges facing their clients so they are equipped to provide the best possible support. With groups that become involved with these youth through a more removed standpoint, including employers and policymakers, it is important to highlight what they face in their daily lives in order to make their situations and behaviors understandable.

Working around a flawed system

The group brought up relevant concerns considering the policy layout of funding for juvenile justice and foster care programs. Legislation such as FFPSA may be well intentioned, but could also produce unintended consequences through strict evidence-based requirements. However, there was also acknowledgement that these systems take significant time and effort to change. The discussion highlighted multiple ways in which states and organizations have worked within the existing system to produce results, which can serve as starting points for further innovation.