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YouthAction Community Leadership Course Youth Justice in NYC

Citizens' Committee for Children's (CCC) YouthAction Community Leadership Course (YCLC) is a youth advocacy training program for high school students from New York City's public and private schools. CCC is an independent child advocacy organization whose mission is to ensure that every child is healthy, housed, educated, and safe. Since 1999, YouthAction NYC has introduced aspiring young leaders to civic engagement and advocacy opportunities.

During this ten-week advocacy training course, YCLC participants meet once a week after school to research and analyze youth issues, and to develop policy and budgetary recommendations to improve the lives of young people in New York City. This semester, the YCLC focused on the juvenile justice system. Students met with experts in the field, analyzed relevant data, and conducted site visits to organizations that provide services, conduct research, and/or work to influence public policy on juvenile justice issues. The following is a summary of the group's findings and recommendations.

Findings and Recommendations

Police/Youth Interactions

We had the opportunity to speak with youth, police officers, and attorneys about their experiences with youth justice in New York City communities. Each of these groups had similar concerns about the often negative interactions between police officers and youth. We also learned that youth of color are more likely to report feeling "over-policed" and targeted due to race.

- We **recommend** that New York City schools implement workshops, beginning in middle school, to educate students about how to have a safe and respectful interaction if approached by a police officer. These ongoing workshops should include police officers from within the school's community and serve as an opportunity for youth to build healthy relationships with them.
- We **recommend** specific training and ongoing professional development for police officers on how to approach and de-escalate conflict with adolescents who, due to normal human development, tend to be more impulsive and less aware of consequences than adults.
- We **recommend** that police officers be explicitly trained to perform their duties with a race-sensitive lens, and that there be greater accountability and oversight with regard to racial bias in policing.
- We **support** the Right to Know Act, which is legislation currently before the City Council. This bill requires police officers to identify themselves and give the specific reasons for police encounters that do not result in an arrest or summons.

Community-Based Alternatives for Low-Level Offenses

During our research, we visited a number of community-based programs that divert young people who have been arrested for low-level offenses away from the justice system, and instead focus on rehabilitation, support, and accountability. Young people can be referred to these programs by their schools, a police officer, or a judge in order for at-risk youth to avoid becoming involved in a court case. These programs have been proven to reduce recidivism, save tax dollars, and contribute to public safety.



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- We **recommend** an expansion of community-based youth justice programs that divert youth who commit low-level offenses away from involvement in the juvenile or adult criminal justice systems. Examples of effective models include youth courts, mental health counseling, community service, and restorative justice programs.
- We **recommend** an initiative to raise awareness about diversion programs among justice system stakeholders in order to ensure that police officers, attorneys, and judges understand the benefits of such programs for youth, families, and communities. We are confident that this will increase the number of referrals to diversion programs as soon as young people have an encounter with the juvenile or adult justice systems.

Juvenile Placement

For youth who have committed more serious crimes, there is a risk that they will face detention or incarceration. Youth under 16 years old who have been processed as juveniles in Family Court are placed in juvenile facilities. Juvenile placement facilities are required to address the rehabilitative and educational needs of the youth who are detained there.

- We **support** Close to Home, an initiative designed to keep youth who are placed in limited and non-secure facilities, close to their families and communities. We **recommend** that NYC closely monitor the implementation of this initiative to ensure that these facilities are effective in meeting the rehabilitative needs of youth as well as the public safety needs of the community.

Youth in Adult Facilities

Youth ages 16 and older are automatically prosecuted as adults and are housed in adult jails and prisons. We learned that youth who have been incarcerated in the adult justice system are far more likely than their peers to experience physical and sexual assault, commit violent felonies, face powerful barriers to education and employment, and suffer from mental health issues. Furthermore, science related to adolescent brain development has shown that adolescents tend to act impulsively, are unable to focus on consequences, and are highly receptive to interventions that teach them to make better choices.

- We **recommend** that New York City government join with other advocates to urge the State legislature to raise the age of criminal responsibility to at least 18 years old.
- We **recommend** that, whenever possible, 16 and 17 year olds cited for low level offenses be diverted from court *or* be placed in Alternative to Incarceration programs. This prevents teenagers from entering the adult prison system.

Re-entering the Community

For youth exiting either juvenile detention or the adult prison system, re-entering society can prove to be very challenging. Many have fallen behind in school credits or dropped out; the stigma of having been “locked up” often makes young people feel ashamed, and they are more likely to suffer from mental health issues than their peers. For those who have committed more serious crimes, their criminal record can prevent them from getting into college, getting a job, and voting. It is believed that these factors greatly contribute to the high rate of recidivism among youth who have been incarcerated.

- We **recommend** an initiative to expand community-based re-entry programs that are tailored to youth and emphasize education, job readiness, mental health, and life skills.
- We **recommend** that the City support state advocacy efforts that would make it easier for youth up to age 21 to be given youthful offender status, which allows for criminal records to be sealed.