

EXPERIENCING PROBATION

**INSIGHTS FROM YOUNG
PEOPLE AND FAMILIES**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Probation Experience Project was conducted by three teams that worked together to conduct the multisite research study from January to December 2023. The core team included young people and families who have experience with youth probation. With support from Child Trends, the core team guided and oversaw all project activities, developed the research agenda and designed the research strategy. The local research teams, in partnership with the core team and Child Trends, refined the research agenda and strategy to meet their local needs and **collected qualitative and quantitative data** from young people and their family members who have experienced probation.¹ Child Trends compiled the findings and all three teams interpreted the findings and developed recommendations.

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ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children, youth and young adults by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit the Foundation's website at www.aecf.org.

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CONTENTS

- 2** Introduction
- 3** Summary of Recommendations
- 4** Transforming Youth Probation Into a Positive Intervention
- 6** Increasing Equity
- 8** Strengthening Support Networks
- 11** Understanding the Effects on Family
- 13** Conclusion
- 14** Endnotes

142,900

young people were on probation in 2021.

Source: <https://www.ojdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezajcs/>

INTRODUCTION

Probation is the most common outcome for young people in the justice system, and it affects both young people and their families. Yet research on probation has not focused on how young people and their families experience the system. The Probation Experience Project set out to address this gap by examining what is and is not working in youth probation from the perspective of young people and families.

In most places, probation agencies still rely on a framework based on surveillance, control and punishment that worsens young people's outcomes. Some jurisdictions are transforming their probation practices to align better with what science says about young people's developmental needs, increase equity and connect young people with community-based opportunities, services and support that can help them thrive as they transition to adulthood. Gaining skills and cultivating healthy relationships within their community improves well-being for young people and reduces the risk of

later justice system involvement.² If youth probation is to be transformed, the voices of young people and their families can guide officials to make positive changes that result in better outcomes.

The project represents a partnership among the Annie E. Casey Foundation, **Child Trends**, a core team that included young people and family members with probation experience and local community-based organizations in six states: California, Indiana, Kansas, Mississippi, New Jersey and New Mexico.³ With technical assistance from Child Trends, the local partners hired and trained young people with probation experience to conduct 22 focus groups and survey 56 young people and 45 family members who have experienced probation. Several themes emerged from the experiences and insights shared by young people and families.

The project team used the findings to create recommendations to share with youth justice practitioners, advocates and policymakers who are working to transform youth probation.



Summary of Recommendations

To transform youth probation, the research teams developed policy and practice recommendations around four main themes that emerged from the findings. Respective sections of this report have more information about the findings.

- **Transforming Youth Probation Into a Positive Intervention**

1. Engage all young people who are on probation in activities that help them identify their strengths and set their goals in areas such as education, work, relationships, health and creativity.
2. Partner with young people to design their probation requirements.
3. Listen to youth and family voices throughout the probation process.
4. Provide easy-to-understand materials that explain probation in various formats, such as print, online and videos.

- **Increasing Equity**

1. Frequently collect, analyze and respond to data on access to — and satisfaction with — probation services and conditions, disaggregated by race, ethnicity and other aspects of identity.
2. Ensure probation staff, conditions and services consider and respond to the racial, ethnic, cultural and other ways young people and families define their identities.

- **Strengthening Support Networks**

1. Provide all young people on probation with access to mental health services and a mentor, in addition to their probation officer.
2. Hire and prepare probation officers to support young people and their families and help ensure their needs are met.
3. Partner with community-based organizations to support the success of young people on probation, and use tools such as databases to connect them and their families with the opportunities, support and services that will enable them to thrive.

- **Understanding the Effects on Family**

1. Create a family navigator program to guide a young person's primary support person — whether a parent, guardian or other caregiver — through the probation process and requirements.
2. Align probation plans and requirements with young people's and families' schedules and responsibilities.
3. Eliminate all probation and court fines and fees for young people.
4. Partner with family members in case planning and conversations about probation requirements.⁴



TRANSFORMING YOUTH PROBATION INTO A POSITIVE INTERVENTION

State and local youth probation agencies consistently express their mission as promoting positive behavioral changes in young people, while addressing their needs and challenges to reduce reoffending.⁵ However, traditional youth probation practices often rely on punitive measures and control, which can hinder young people's development and worsen trauma and reoffending rates.⁶ The experiences of the young people and families who took part in the surveys and focus groups point to this discrepancy. They underscore the urgent need for probation to shift to an approach that supports each young person's development and builds on their strengths and the strengths of their families and communities.⁷

Fewer than half of young people and families rated their probation experience as positive.

Young people and families were dependent on the probation staff they encountered if they wanted to successfully complete probation. Family members described feeling helpless during negative interactions. In 18 of the 22 focus groups, young people and families said they worried about increased punishments, such as stricter probation requirements or arrest.

Young people and families also recounted instances of physical and verbal altercations with probation and police officers. In a third of the focus groups, young people and

family members said they felt that probation staff abused their power, violated the privacy of young people and their families and overstepped boundaries.

Young people want to learn life skills while on probation.

In 20 out of 22 focus groups, young people and families reported a lack of meaningful activities and educational opportunities while on probation. Young people and family members said they wanted to gain life skills such as goal setting, time management, financial management, problem solving and conflict management.

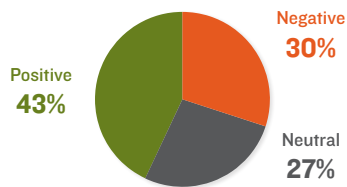
Only half of young people felt the services, support and resources they received prepared them for success once probation ended.

When asked about services that would have been beneficial, young people desired more employment and education opportunities during and after their probation experience. In related questions, only 44% of young people indicated they received opportunities during probation where they were able to explore something they were interested in, and 48% reported they learned a new skill while they were on probation.

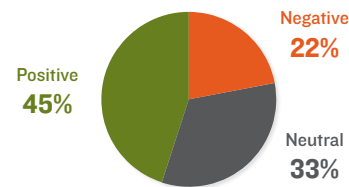
**"I FEEL LIKE IT SHOULDN'T
BE SO MUCH LIKE A
PUNISHMENT. IT SHOULD
BE MORE REHABILITATION,
GETTING BACK INTO
SOCIETY AND BEING
PRODUCTIVE."**

— YOUNG PERSON

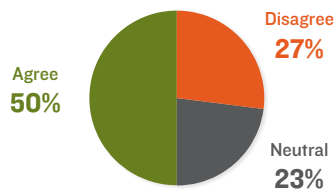
Young people's rating of their probation experience



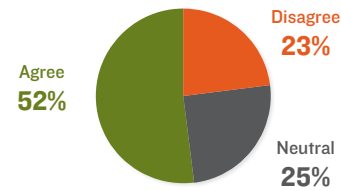
Family members' rating of their probation experience



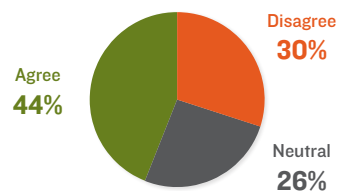
Young people: the services, support and/or resources I received prepared me for success once probation ended.



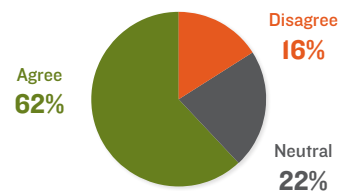
Family members: someone explained the youth's probation conditions to me



Young people: my probation officer listened to my concerns and/or suggestions



Family members: I understood what I should do as a parent/caregiver when my youth was on probation



Young people and family members reported that probation staff failed to account for their opinions and needs.

Across focus groups and surveys, young people and families shared that they want to feel heard and respected and receive individualized support. However, in half of the focus groups, young people and family members said that probation staff did not take their opinions and needs seriously.

Many young people and family members found probation confusing to navigate.

In the survey, when asked what support would have been helpful during and after probation, young people and family members shared that they wished they knew more about how probation works. In 13 of the 22 focus groups, young people and family members said that youth probation is confusing to navigate, which

created challenges and barriers to following rules and conditions. Study participants felt young people should receive additional guidance to understand court processes, probation rules and terminologies, as well as help with keeping track of probation requirements such as court dates. Finally, young people and family members reported that inconsistencies in communication and information caused confusion about the probation system and its processes and often resulted in adverse outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To align the experiences of young people and families with the rehabilitative mission of probation, consider the following:

- **Engage all young people who are on probation in activities that help them identify their strengths and set their goals in areas such as education, work, relationships, health and creativity.** Input from young

people and their families on activities should happen throughout the probation term rather than simply an assessment at the start. Based on what young people identify as strengths and goals, they should be connected to programs, services and opportunities that will help them build on their strengths and interests and achieve their goals.⁸

- **Partner with young people in the design of their probation requirements.** By encouraging young people to set goals and hold themselves accountable for their actions⁹ the probation planning process can play a crucial role in supporting the positive development of young individuals.¹⁰ The process can include determining meaningful — and motivating — incentives for when the young person achieves or exceeds their goals. This helps people understand the nature of consequences.
- **Listen to youth and family voices throughout the probation process.** This entails providing young people and their families with ongoing opportunities such as surveys to provide feedback on their probation experiences, needs and aspirations, then implementing changes based on the results. It also means empowering young people and families to make decisions regarding the programs and services they engage with and to participate in setting policy.¹¹
- **Provide easy-to-understand materials that explain probation in various formats, such as print, online and videos.** Young people and families found probation confusing to navigate with probation requirements that were complicated and did not address the young person’s needs. Information about the probation processes fosters success and quicker probation termination.¹² Young people and their family members need explanations about the court and probation process, terminology, rules and available help. Such information should be provided at basic reading levels and in multiple languages. These resources should be accessible in various forms, such as chatbots, orientation sessions or infographics. To be most effective, resources should be developed in partnership with individuals with direct experiences with youth probation.¹³

“IT WOULD HAVE BEEN NICE IF THEY WOULD HAVE UNDERSTOOD MY POINT AND RESPECTFULLY UNDERSTAND MY MOM’S CONCERNS.”

— YOUNG PERSON



INCREASING EQUITY

Youth justice systems in the United States exhibit marked racial, ethnic and economic disparities.¹⁴ These disparities are evident at every level of the system, from arrest and diversion to incarceration. They stem from a legacy of discriminatory policies, including neighborhood disinvestment, overpolicing in communities of color, differential enforcement of laws and charging decisions, and unequal legal representation.¹⁵

While administrative data provide evidence of these disparities, data lack the nuance and depth of the narratives of young people and their families with youth probation experiences. This project sought to uplift these personal experiences, offering a more detailed understanding of the day-to-day realities within youth probation. This section summarizes the experiences young people and family members had with systemic inequities within youth probation.

Many young people and family members did not feel treated fairly when on probation.

When asked whether they felt they were treated fairly based on race, gender or sexual identity, young people and family members in five out of 22 focus groups said they felt they were treated fairly. On the other hand, in 14 of the 22 focus groups, young people and family members indicated they did not feel they were treated fairly, commonly describing this in terms of discrimination.

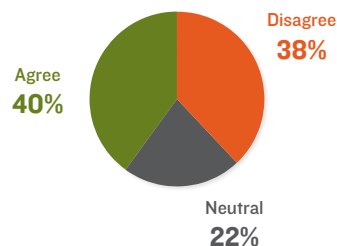
Fewer than half of young people and families received services, support and resources related to their racial, ethnic or cultural background.

Though young people of color are given probation at higher rates than white youth, not all young people are offered services, support and resources that align with their identity.¹⁶ Examples of racially, ethnically or culturally relevant services, support and resources included having materials translated into a language the family speaks at home and connecting young people to role models or probation officers who hold similar identities. In the survey, only 40% of young people reported receiving services, support and resources related to their racial, ethnic or cultural background.

Young people and family members identified situational and environmental factors that contributed to making the probation experience more challenging.

Navigating family and work responsibilities as well as their environment alongside probation requirements posed a challenge for young people and family members in 13 out of 22 focus groups. Family members reported challenges supporting their youth because they were unable to attend court appearances, meetings and services due to jobs or other responsibilities. Young people discussed their need for adult role models to help them navigate the world and pressure from peers to engage in negative and risky behavior. Family members talked about challenges such as single parenthood, youth peer pressure and the impact of social media.

Young people: the services, support or resources were related to my racial, ethnic or cultural background



“THEM MEETING ME WHERE I’M AT IS MORE WHAT I’M TRYING TO SAY. IF IT IS HARD FOR ME TO GET TO THE OFFICE, BUT I CAN MEET YOU IN THE HALF HOUR THAT I HAVE IN BETWEEN WORK AND SCHOOL. I HAD TO DROP OUT OF SCHOOL WHEN I GOT ARRESTED BECAUSE I DIDN’T HAVE ANY MEANS TO A CAR. AND ALL OF THESE THINGS WERE SCHEDULED WHEN I HAD SCHOOL.”

— YOUNG PERSON

RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure youth probation is more responsive to the identities and backgrounds of young people and their families, consider the following:

- **Frequently collect, analyze and respond to data on access to — and satisfaction with — probation services and conditions, disaggregated by race, ethnicity and other social identities.** To ensure equitable and culturally responsive care, probation departments must identify and address existing disparities regarding access to services, satisfaction with services and overall youth outcomes (e.g., recidivism rates).¹⁷ Intentionally collecting and tracking these data can help probation departments reform their practices toward greater inclusion and equity, in turn improving youth and family satisfaction and outcomes.
- **Ensure probation staff, conditions and services consider and respond to the racial, ethnic, cultural and other identities of young people and families.** This may include increasing community representation among probation staff so that young people and families feel more seen and understood. Probation departments and juvenile courts should also develop specific guidelines and protocols on how to engage with young people and families in a culturally responsive manner. The Annie E. Casey Foundation has developed a **checklist** for juvenile probation agencies on racial and ethnic equity and inclusion that can be used to brainstorm and develop related strategies.¹⁸



STRENGTHENING SUPPORT NETWORKS

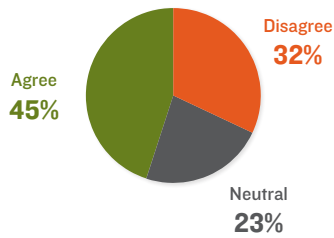
Support networks play a vital role in the successful completion of youth probation.¹⁹ They can include a range of people, including family members, mentors, advocates, service providers, counselors, social workers, probation officers, school staff and judges.²⁰ Some probation officers are also responsible for connecting young people and their families to community-based programs and government services to address their unmet needs, providing interventions such as motivational interviewing and acting as a liaison with the court and service providers.²¹

Further, beyond the youth justice system, young people and their families may be connected with — or mandated to participate in — counseling, mentorship programs, tutoring and other wraparound services and programs. These services and types of support, and the individuals who provide them, create opportunities for young people to build positive support networks that can help them achieve their goals and transition to adulthood.²²

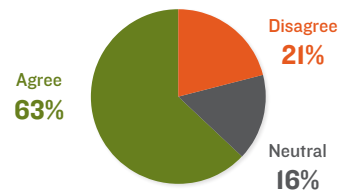
“I KNOW THAT THEY’VE [SOCIAL WORKERS] REALLY HELPED HIM, THEY SUPPORT HIM, THEY COUNSEL HIM AND EVERYTHING AND HE ALWAYS TALKS GOOD ABOUT HOW THEY TREAT HIM ... THEY HAVE ENDEARMENT FOR HIM, AND HE’S COMFORTABLE WITH THEM.”

— FAMILY MEMBER

Young people: I felt like my probation officer really cared about me and my future



Young people: I was given helpful services, support and/or opportunities during probation that I needed or wanted



In reflecting on their networks of support, young people and family members discussed experiences with helpful adults, their relationships with probation officers and the services that they received in connection with community-based programs. This section summarizes those findings.

Fifty-nine percent of young people agreed that they had at least one positive relationship while on probation with a person that they could go to for support, advice or information.

In 20 of the 22 focus groups, young people and family members mentioned at least one person — social workers, caseworkers, judges, counselors, probation officers, school staff, family members or mentors — who supported them in navigating probation. Young people and family members described helpful people as being kind, supportive and respectful; offering second chances to young people; and providing guidance on how to navigate probation and the situational and environmental factors that lead to probation. In the survey, young people identified family members and case managers as extremely supportive (44% and 33%, respectively). Most family members (67%) identified case managers as supportive or extremely supportive.

Fewer than half of young people agreed that their probation officers really cared about them and their future.

The probation officer assigned to a young person has a lot of power to shape their experience. Some young people and family members mentioned they had present, supportive and understanding probation officers. However, in a majority of focus groups — 16 out of 22 — families spoke of negative experiences with their

“THEY [COMMUNITY-BASED DIVERSION PROGRAM STAFF] STARTED SHOWING ME COPING SKILLS, STUFF NOT TO DO, BASICALLY THEY WERE SHOWING ME AGAIN WHAT’S RIGHT OR WRONG.”

— YOUNG PERSON

probation officer. In the survey, fewer than half of young people (45%) agreed that their probation officer really cared about them and their future.

When discussing negative experiences, family members expressed concern that probation officers may have large caseloads that make it hard to take the time to invest in youth well-being and success. Young people shared that they were assigned many different probation officers during their time on probation and a lack of communication with probation officers both during and outside of required meetings made it challenging to develop relationships. Further, young people noted that probation officers often were not aware of the resources available in the community to support young people while on probation.

In some jurisdictions, probation is of indeterminate length. The power imbalance between young people,

families and probation officers affected their interactions. Young people mentioned that they did not trust their probation officers and found it challenging to be open and honest or share their experiences with them for fear of the repercussions. Family members shared that they understood the power probation officers have, which changed how they family members behaved, because they did not want to cause issues for their young person.

Substance use, mental health and community-based diversion programs were the most discussed services that were helpful to young people and family members while experiencing probation.

Connecting young people to opportunities, services and resources within the community promotes their positive behavior change, personal growth and long-term success. Services young people and family members found helpful included those dealing with substance use and mental health, as well as community-based diversion programs. Overall, 63% of young people who responded to the survey felt they received helpful services, support and opportunities during probation that they wanted or needed.

Some young people and family members desired more services to support the development of young people's careers and life skills while on probation.

Young people and family members discussed the importance of developing career and life skills for youth while on probation to help them reintegrate into the community after probation. They believed these skills would be an opportunity to help young people avoid violating their probation, prepare for success in applying for jobs or school, and become more independent. Developing these skills also would provide young people with financial incentives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance the networks of support available to young people and their families, consider the following:

- **Provide all young people on probation with access to mental health services and a mentor, in addition to their probation officer.** Young people need a broader, more diverse network to support their success and well-being in ways that can continue beyond their time on probation.²¹ This network should include individuals outside of the court system, such as counselors or other people who can support trauma healing and mental wellness, as well as mentors who have life experiences similar to those of the young people who are on probation.
- **Hire and prepare probation officers to support young people and their families and help ensure their needs are met.** Probation officers should be trained to partner with young people and families and use strengths-based, trauma-informed approaches in all communication and service provision. When matching probation officers with young people, consider factors such as social and racial identities, life experiences and areas of need.²⁴
- **Partner with community-based organizations to support the success of young people on probation, and use tools such as databases to connect them and their families with the opportunities, support and services that will enable them to thrive.** Creating or using an up-to-date, accessible database of community organizations and services would allow probation officers to become aware of the available services and resources, better connect youth providers that match young people's needs and build a network of coordinated care.²⁵

“I FELT LIKE I HAD TO BITE MY TONGUE TO THE PROBATION OFFICER SO SHE WOULDN'T NITPICK WITH MY CHILD IN THERE.”

— FAMILY MEMBER



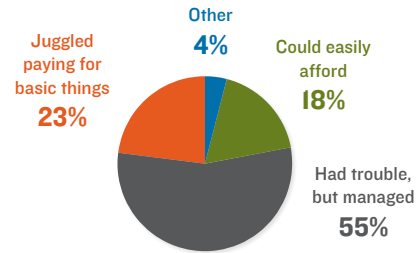
UNDERSTANDING THE EFFECTS ON FAMILY

Transforming youth probation includes ensuring young people and their families have a hand in shaping their case planning and the services they receive and in determining how they define success.²⁶ Probation affects not only young people but also their families, who navigate the process alongside them, often grappling with attending court dates; paying fines, fees and/or restitution; meeting with probation officers; and participating in family counseling or other activities. While families serve as a vital source of emotional and financial support for their young person during probation, the

“MY DAD DROVE ME TO ALL OF MY COURT-ORDERED PSYCHIATRIC APPOINTMENTS. AND MY MOM WOULD SIT WITH ME DURING AA [ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS] SO I DIDN’T HAVE TO BE THERE ALONE BECAUSE SHE KNEW HOW MUCH I HATED IT AND DIDN’T WANT TO BE THERE.”

— FAMILY MEMBER

How did fees and costs affect families and their households?



traditional probation model, with its focus on control and punishment, often sidelines them as potential resources.

Research shows that prioritizing both young people and their families can lead to better outcomes for young people.²⁷ The project found that family support is common but not universal among participants. Probation often overlooks families’ unique needs, creating challenges in their navigation of the system. Furthermore, the financial burden of probation can be significant for families. This section summarizes the findings on how families are affected by youth probation.

Most young people and family members shared that they or their family invested in their young people through logistical, financial and emotional support while their young person was on probation.

In 18 out of 22 focus groups, young people and family members discussed how relatives, godparents and friends supported them during their time on probation. Support included providing transportation to and attending court hearings, probation meetings, programs and other services; financial support to cover probation costs; and encouragement for young people to complete their probation requirements.

However, in nine out of 14 of the youth focus groups, young people said that their family members were not supportive while they were on probation.²⁸ Unsupportive behaviors included not providing financial or emotional support. As a result, young people faced feelings of isolation and prolonged involvement in the youth probation system.

Family members felt probation staff did not consider their young person’s needs or their family situation while their young person was on probation.

Young people and their families have unique needs based on their household structure, socioeconomic status, racial and social identities and more. In seven out of nine family focus groups, family members shared that throughout the time their young person was on probation, staff did not consider their youth’s needs or their family situation.²⁹ Family members noted that staff did not take the time to support them in navigating probation processes or requirements. Further, required meetings were often scheduled at inconvenient times given family member obligations, such as work and child care. This resulted in young people not receiving assistance or receiving delayed assistance.

Roughly half of family members stated that they were required to pay a probation-related fee or cost as a result of their young person being on probation.

Probation often results in financial costs for young people and their families, whether in the form of restitution, monitoring, legal fees or other expenses. The costs associated with probation can be burdensome on family members, who may take responsibility for paying — or be required to pay — on behalf of their young person. In the survey, 49% of family members stated that they were required to pay a probation-related fee or cost. Of those required to pay a

fee or cost, about three-quarters of family members reported that they had some trouble paying the fee or had to juggle paying for basic needs to cover the fees. Overall, of those required to pay a probation-related fee or cost, a large majority of family members shared that they were unaffordable. In some jurisdictions, young people with unpaid fees could be detained or face other serious consequences.³⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS

To maximize families’ ability to support young people on probation:

- **Create a family navigator program to guide a young person’s primary support person — whether a parent, guardian or other caregiver — through the probation process and requirements.** To foster trust, the navigator should be employed by a community organization rather than a government agency. Navigators, especially if they are family members who have gone through the process with their own young people, can provide compassionate and knowledgeable guidance for the primary support person.³¹
- **Align probation plans and requirements with young people’s and families’ schedules and responsibilities.** Probation departments need to work with families and young people to create a probation plan that is manageable for all.³² For instance, probation and court personnel should offer meeting times, or a court calendar, that allow family members to be present without missing work or other obligations. This might mean setting aside early morning or evening appointment times. Likewise, probation requirements should not conflict with a young person’s school, work or other responsibilities.
- **Eliminate all probation and court fines and fees for young people.** Fines and fees place immense pressure on young people and their families. Furthermore, they do not support young people’s positive growth and development. Research shows that imposing financial penalties is associated with worse outcomes for young people.³³

“WHEN IT’S TIME FOR HER TO GO TO COURT OR WHATEVER, HOW COME I DON’T GET ANY [SAY] IN WHAT HAPPENS TO HER, BECAUSE I’M THE ONE WHO KNOWS HER BEST?”

— FAMILY MEMBER

- **Partner with family members in case planning and conversations about probation requirements.**³⁴

Family members should be able to discuss how they can support young people in achieving their goals on probation and what they might need to do so. Through meaningful collaboration, family members can actively support positive outcomes for young people.³⁵

CONCLUSION

The insights of the young people and families who participated in the Probation Experience Project point to the progress that has been made and — more importantly — the distance that remains before youth probation is transformed into the intervention that young people, families and communities deserve. The gap between policy intentions and actual practice highlights the critical need to partner with and listen to affected young people and families.

“WE ALL NEED THAT ONE PERSON, LIKE THE MENTOR TO HELP US, LIKE TEACH US.”

— YOUNG PERSON

ENDNOTES

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- 2 Sieving, R. E., McRee, A. L., McMorris, B. J., Schlafer, R. J., Gower, A. L., Kapa, H. M.,...Resnick, M. D. (2017). Youth–adult connectedness: A key protective factor for adolescent health. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 52(3), S275–S278. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2016.07.037>. And, Sanders, J., Munford, R., Thimasarn-Anwar, T., Liebenberg, L., & Ungar, M. (2015). The role of positive youth development practices in building resilience and enhancing wellbeing for at-risk youth. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 42, 40–53. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.02.006>
- 3 The local community-based organizations are the six listed here:
 - Camden County Family Support Organization (<https://www.camdenfso.org>) in New Jersey;
 - Community Action Board of Santa Cruz Inc. (<https://cabinc.org>) in California;
 - La Plazita Institute (<https://laplazitainstitute.org>) in New Mexico;
 - Progeny of Destination Innovation (<https://www.progenyks.com>) in Kansas;
 - Strong Arms of MS (<https://strongarmsofms.com>) in Mississippi; and
 - VOICES (<https://voicescorp.org>) in Indiana.
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