

# THROUGH THEIR EYES

Stories of Reflection, Resistance,  
and Resilience on Juvenile  
Incarceration from San Francisco  
women, girls, trans and gender  
non-binary people



YOUNG WOMEN'S  
FREEDOM CENTER



FREEDOM  
RESEARCH  
INSTITUTE

# SUMMARY



Through their Eyes illuminates the experiences of fifty-one system-impacted cis and trans young women and girls, trans young men and boys, and gender-expansive youth who experienced the juvenile delinquency system, incarceration, and probation in San Francisco. This report is a follow-up study to Young Women's Freedom Center's last report, A Radical Model for Decriminalization. A Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) team gathered in the Fall of 2019 to analyze the life course interview data for people directly impacted by San Francisco's juvenile delinquency system. The report centers the voices and expertise of system-impacted people by thoroughly detailing how they navigated being criminalized, incarcerated, and surveilled as children growing up in San Francisco.

“With nearly 28 years of advocacy and organizing work centering our collective experiences, compromising, changing laws, and calling for something different, we have yet to see a true reckoning, acknowledgment, and commitment to the radical change we seek. While progress is being made, 3 decades later, cis and trans young women and girls, trans young men and boys, and gender-expansive youth of color are not better off. Efforts thus far reflect the inability of our country and those in power to acknowledge how white and male supremacy has and continues to guide decision making at all levels – and what is at stake: people's lives and those of the ones they love most, including our children and young people, whom the “state” claims to rehabilitate through the delinquency system.

“Through their Eyes is a body of work that centers the experiences and expertise of young people themselves who have experienced the delinquency system in San Francisco but reflects a shared understanding of youth in the system across the country. The realities of their experiences are hard to read, yet the truth they tell must be the center of our collective work moving forward to realize freedom and liberation for everyone.”

**JESSICA NOWLAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
YOUNG WOMEN'S FREEDOM CENTER**

**THIS SUMMARY  
REPORT  
PROVIDES  
A SNAPSHOT  
OF THE DATA  
FINDINGS IN  
THROUGH  
THEIR EYES.**



# SUMMARY OF DATA FINDINGS

## **PART 1: EXPERIENCE OF THE JUVENILE DELINQUENCY SYSTEM**

- Theme 1: Questionable Reasons for Incarceration
- Theme 2: Negligence on the Inside
- Theme 3: Enduring Impact of Incarceration

## **PART 2: ENVISIONING A HEALTHIER FUTURE FOR SYSTEM IMPACTED YOUTH**

- Theme 4: System Recommendations: Voicing Needs
- Theme 5: What Could Have Made a Difference?

# THEME 1

## QUESTIONABLE REASONS FOR INCARCERATION

These categories represent circumstances where youth became involved in the juvenile delinquency system, or were pushed deeper in the system for rationale that are unreasonable, unjust, or for circumstances beyond their control.

**CATEGORY** **SURVIVAL CRIMES** Youth were charged with a criminal case as a result of working in the underground street economy as a way to meet their basic needs. Youth acquired food, clothing or other personal items from local stores without paying. Others engaged in sex work to make money, while some were forced against their will. Many of these youth were in the foster care setting or living in poverty. They did not have their basic needs met, and were charged criminally for attempting to meet these needs.

---

**ABUSE OF POWER** Youth identified 4 scenarios where law enforcement and the court system unfairly detained and charged them - trumped up charges, gang enhancements, forced to plead guilty, and detained without sufficient reason. Youth with gang enhancements or trumped up charges obtained more serious charges associated with longer sentences. Other youth felt forced to plead guilty when they were innocent or when it was against their best interests because they were not given sufficient explanation by the court system. A few youth were held at JJC but later released once they were cleared of their charges.

---

**PROBATION VIOLATIONS** Youth were pushed deeper into the system because they were set up for failure: too closely surveilled through juvenile probation and given excessively restrictive requirements. If youth violated the terms of their probation, they could face incarceration, a longer term of probation, or additional charges.

---

**SCHOOL** School staff called in police enforcement to handle issues that arose inside of schools. Youth were then charged in the juvenile delinquency system.

---

**FOSTER CARE ENTANGLEMENT** Foster youth acquired new criminal charges related to their status in the foster care system.

---

**SUB-CATEGORY** **GROUP HOMES** Youth in group homes picked up new charges because of incidents that arose inside of their group home. Or they ran away to ensure their safety.

---

**WAITING FOR PLACEMENT** While Foster youth were waiting for a new placement, they were incarcerated at JJC because the system could not find an immediate home or group home for them.

---

## THEME 2

# NEGLIGENCE ON THE INSIDE

Youth shared their experiences while incarcerated at JJC where they were inflicted with unnecessary harm that caused long lasting trauma in their life.

**CATEGORY** **DISRESPECTFUL INTERPERSONAL INTERACTIONS** Staff from the juvenile delinquency system spoke to youth in a degrading and disrespectful manner. These interactions reinforced negative and harmful stereotypes.

---

**EXCESSIVE PHYSICAL VIOLENCE** Incarcerated youth were physically harmed by staff inside of JJC, while being forcibly restrained.

---

**SUB-CATEGORY** **SHACKLED** Youth were placed at increased risk of physical harm while unnecessarily shackled.

---

**SOLITARY CONFINEMENT** Youth were isolated in their cells for extended periods of time through a de facto practice of social isolation.

---

**ISSUES WITH MALE PO'S IN UNITS** Youth expressed extreme discomfort with male officers inside of JJC. Especially, when male officers could see them while using the restroom, undressing, and showering. Health: Youth's health concerns were not properly addressed while incarcerated.

---

**SUB-CATEGORY** **PHYSICAL HEALTH** Youth may have made requests for medical attention but were ignored, provided care too late, or given sub-par care. Often worsening whatever condition, they were suffering.

---

**PREGNANCY** Youth were incarcerated while pregnant, and the conditions of detention made it impossible for them to care for their unborn child.

---

**MENTAL HEALTH** Youth's mental health was not adequately addressed while incarcerated and, in some cases, made worse by the care that they did receive.

---

**SUB-CATEGORY** **MEDICATION** Youth were mandated to take psychotropic medication without their consent or their family's approval.

---

**THERAPY** Youth did not feel comfortable receiving therapy from the delinquency system because they believed that this was designed to compile evidence against them.

---



## THEME 3

# ENDURING IMPACT OF INCARCERATION

Youth share the enduring impact that being involved in the juvenile delinquency system caused them.

**CATEGORY** **EMOTIONAL DISTRESS** Youth describe the long-term impact of being incarcerated during their childhood.

---

**JAIL IS NOT A PLACE FOR KIDS** Youth concluded that juvenile detention is a developmentally inappropriate place for all children.

---

**FAMILY SEPARATION** Youth were separated from their family as a result of incarceration, during a time when they needed the support of loved ones the most.

---



## THEME 4

# SYSTEMS RECOMMENDATIONS -VOICING NEEDS

Youth provided insightful recommendations for transforming the juvenile delinquency system, that would better support the needs of system-impacted youth.

**CATEGORY** **PLACEMENT SELF-ADVOCACY IN FOSTER CARE** Youth want to be a part of the decision making process for out of home placements. They want to remain as close to their community as possible to maintain important ties to loved ones.

---

**RETHINKING PROBATION** Youth provided recommendations for improving juvenile probation that focused on them being able to enact self-determined goals.

---

**SUB-CATEGORY** **REDUCE EXCESSIVE MONITORING** Youth recommend that probation officers reduce excessive monitoring of their life because this places youth at increased risk of recidivism.

---

**REQUIREMENTS IMPEDE GOALS** The requirements that probation officers placed on youth impeded their ability to be successful because they were time consuming and not aligned with their own goals.

---

**ECONOMIC SUPPORT** Youth identified economic stability through securing reliable and well-paid employment, as the most important goal post-detention.

---



## THEME 5

# WHAT COULD HAVE MADE A DIFFERENCE?

Youth reflected on what could have made a difference in their life while they were a part of the juvenile delinquency system.

**CATEGORY POSITIVE STRENGTH BASED INTERACTIONS** Adults working with system-impacted youth need to engage with them in a way that focuses on their strengths, and provide them with positive reinforcement.

---

**SUPPORTIVE SERVICE PROVIDERS** Youth want the adult providers to visibly demonstrate they care for them and are interested in their wellbeing.

---

**SERVICES THAT ADDRESS ROOT CAUSES** Youth recommend that programs and services address the root causes of their delinquency involvement related to poverty and trauma.

---

**COMMUNITY SUPPORT** Youth highlighted the importance of receiving support and services through community-based organizations located in their communities, where they felt safe and trusted the adults they worked with.

---



# NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

“

It is a political act not to remain silent. It is a political act to voice words that convey realities that hide in the shadows. What the visceral bodies of cis and trans young women, trans men and young men, and gender-expansive people know to be true is often not believed, scrutinized, or vilified. The survivors of R Kelly’s abuse spoke out for many years with no recompense, and even now, they receive death threats for speaking out. Countless people doubted and picked apart Christine Blasey Ford’s testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee. She also received death threats for speaking out against Brett Kavanaugh. Ford’s status as a well-educated upper-class White woman did not even protect her. It is often easier to call survivors liars or say they misinterpreted their abuser’s intentions rather than hold men or the state accountable for their behavior. These women who have publicly spoken out against gender-based violence have faced extreme public scrutiny and violent threats for not remaining silent. It is a political act not to remain silent because our silence will not protect us.

At the Young Women’s Freedom Center, and in a small way with this report, we attempt to rewrite damaging narratives applied to system-involved youth of color. We seek to make visible the strength and brilliance of the young people that shared their experiences with us. As you read through the extreme obstacles they faced, I want to remind you that they were kids, just like the kids you know. Kids who wanted to have fun with their friends, play sports after school, and attend prom. Those regular quotidian experiences did not happen for these youth because they attended alternative schools and navigated cumbersome requirements placed on them by juvenile probation. I hope you also bear witness to the transformative leadership of the youth organizers that analyzed the interviews in this report and worked on the campaign to shut down San Francisco’s Juvenile Justice Center. They, too, have been impacted by juvenile incarceration but have transformed their lives and communities and are powerful leaders ready to show us all the way.

We enlist you in creating a radical future, free of a brutal system of mass incarceration. My deepest hope is that we can do better for our young people and provide them with nurturing systems that foster joy and self-determined futures. Now this feels even more possible. Remember the words of Angela Davis, that freedom is a constant struggle. Stay vigilant. Together in community, let us alchemize our painful past into a beautiful new possibility.

**ALEZANDRA ZARAGOZA MELENDREZ, PRESIDENT OF FREEDOM RESEARCH INSTITUTE  
YOUNG WOMEN’S FREEDOM CENTER**