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## What Youths Say Matters: A Historical Look

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## Why Youths' Perceptions Matter

Adolescence is the second greatest opportunity for young brains to learn after ages 0 – 3 years old. During these two time periods, the brain is rapidly changing and is open to learning, providing opportunities for interventions that promote positive development (Steinberg, 2014). Adolescent development research is pointing juvenile justice systems to practices and approaches that respond to young offenders in ways that minimize the disruption caused by out-of-home placement and maximize youths' potentials to grow up and live productive, crime-free and meaningful lives. For example, research shows several practices promoting positive youth development can prevent future crime: Creating healthy and nurturing relationships between youths and staff and between youths and their families, helping to advance youths' educational and employment skills and making sure youths experience the juvenile justice system as fair and safe (National Research Council, 2013). Research also has shown that youths' perceptions impact their behavior while in custody and when they return to the community. Youths' perceptions also offer many opportunities for staff and leadership to positively influence youths. The same research concluded that measuring youths' perceptions is a valid, cost-effective means to reduce recidivism.<sup>1</sup> In short, what youths say matters.

Facilities and programs participating in Performance-based Standards (PbS) survey youths twice a year to hear from them about facility safety, culture, services and the quality of life they are experiencing. This issue brief looks at what youths have been saying over the past five years and some of the specific responses related to research. Overall the data shows positive shifts in perceptions that indicate the adolescent developmental approach is taking hold in the deep end of the juvenile justice system.

Some highlights over the past five years include:

- More youths are having generally positive experiences, reporting improved facility living conditions and programming;
- More youths are being treated fairly, reporting facility staff and rules are fair;
- More youths are feeling safe;
- More youths are feeling connected to their families and social supports;
- More youths are reporting positive relationships with staff; and
- More youths are engaged in their treatment plan and planning.

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<sup>1</sup> Pathways to Desistance study presented at the June 2012 National Institutes of Justice (NIJ) conference. For more information please go to: [www.pathwaysstudy.pitt.edu](http://www.pathwaysstudy.pitt.edu)



## Overview

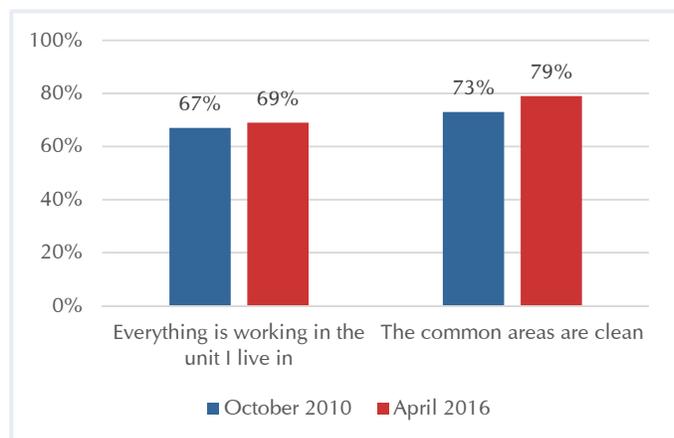
The PbS Youth Climate Survey has been a part of PbS since the first data collection in 1998. The 52 survey questions include many posed and validated by the national Survey of Youth in Residential Placement (SYRP) and included within the Pathways to Desistance Study. The questions ask for youths' opinions of conditions, perceptions of safety, understanding their rights, access and quality of medical and mental health services, connection and contact with families and community, helpfulness of school and staff and describing staff-youth relationships. PbS facilities use the survey data to identify ways they can improve youths' experiences and facility quality of life and use the PbS improvement plan process to develop, implement and monitor new or different approaches and practices to increase youths' positive perceptions. Asking youths about their experiences provides a needed forum for youths to be heard and is essential information to manage safe, effective facilities and programs.

The youths surveyed come from 103 correction, 49 detention and 15 assessment centers in 36 states. The facilities range in size from less than five youths to over 200. As the number of facilities is shrinking across the country, the average daily population is similarly dropping (now at about 62 in correction facilities and 38 in detention facilities participating in PbS). Most of the youths surveyed in PbS facilities are male (83%), have mental health needs (65%) and substance use needs (74%). The number of youths placed in custody for person offenses has decreased slightly from about 41% to 39% of the population, property offenders have dropped from 27% to 22%, drug, public order and property offenders have remained relatively stable at between 6 – 9% and technical violators have increased from 10% to 16%. The youths' average age is 17 years old in correction facilities and 16 in detention and assessment programs. White youths make up 38% of the population, black youths 30% and Hispanic youths 21%.

## More Youths Reported Positive General Living Conditions

The Pathways to Desistance Study found that youths who reported a generally more positive facility experience were about 36 percent less likely to continue offending, according to self-reports, and about 49 percent less likely to continue, according to arrest and/or return to placement reports. PbS asks youths ten questions about living conditions and facility climate. Responses show more youths reporting better living conditions.

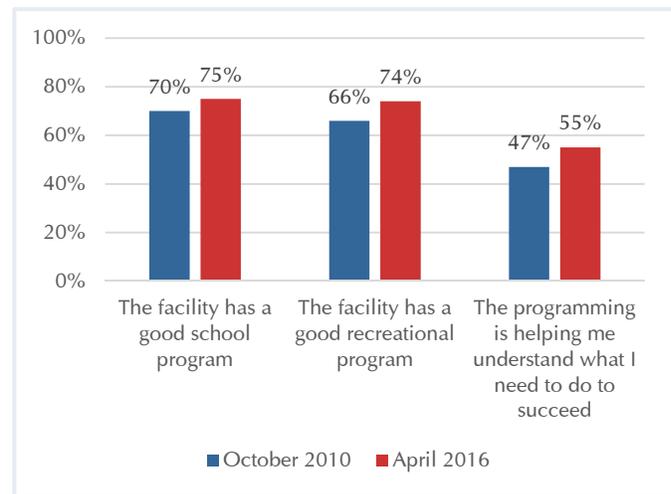
- Nearly all youths (90%) reported receiving the necessary items they need in April 2016, an increase from 85% in October 2010; and
- In April 2016, 53% of youths rated the food as good, an increase from 42% in October 2010.



## More Youths Said Education and Recreation Programs are Good

Building youths' skills, academic and vocational, is one of the most effective program types to reduce recidivism (Lipsey, Howell, Kelly, Chapman & Carver, 2010). Most recently, in April 2016, 80 percent of the youths in PbS facilities said they attended school while at the facility. In addition:

- More youths (64%) rated school as “Very helpful” or “Helpful” in April 2016 than in October 2010 (57%);
- The percent of youths who say they get at least one hour of exercise during weekdays has increased—80% of youths in April 2016, compared to 77% in October 2010; and
- In correction facilities, the percent of youths confined for more than 60 days whose records indicate they completed a vocational skills curriculum slightly decreased in April 2016 to 63% from 65% in October 2010.



## More Youths Reported Feeling Fairly Treated and Safe

The Pathways to Desistance Study found a reduction of system involvement and antisocial activity for youths who rated the facility as more fair and found about a 6% reduction of probability of system involvement and antisocial activity in youths who reported feeling safe. PbS survey data shows:

- In April 2016, 75% of youths reported that staff were fair about discipline issues, an increase from 68% reporting that staff were fair about discipline issues in October 2010.
- The number of youths reporting that they fear for their safety continues to drop. In April 2016, the percentage decreased to 17% from the reported 18% in October 2010.

PbS collects data to assist and support implementation and monitoring of the Prison Rape Elimination Act of 2003 (PREA). PbS asks youths three questions also used by the Survey of Youths in Residential Placement about whether or not they have been the victim of sexual abuse:

- In April 2016, 2% of youths reported that someone at the facility had forced them to engage in sexual activity, slightly less than the 3% who reported the same in October 2010;
- Of the youths, the percent who said the incident was reported to a staff member, counselor, teacher or someone else who could help increased to 40% in April 2016, up from 31% in October 2010; and
- The percent of youths who reported that something had been done to stop it from happening again also increased, to 36% in April 2016 from 24% in October 2010.



## More Youths Reported Positive Relationships with Staff

As the field moves to implement the developmental approach, many agencies and facilities are focusing on healthy, nurturing staff-youth relationships and modeling PbS' commitment to treat all youths in custody as one of our own. The relationships are improving:

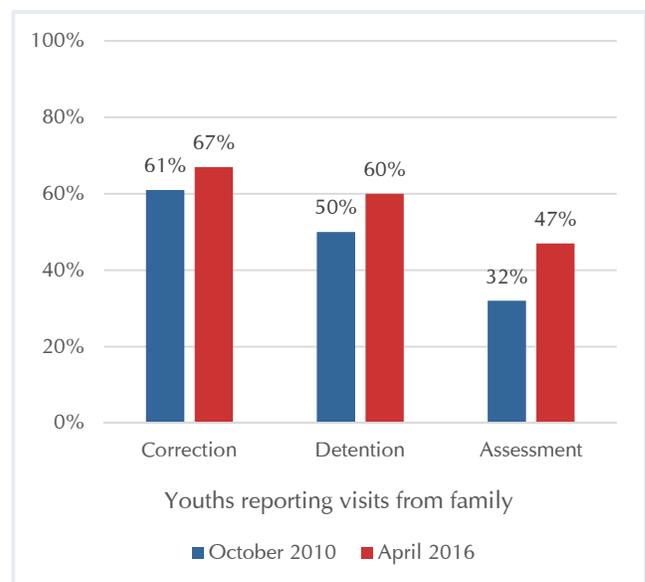
- When asked if staff show youths respect, 86% of youths said “yes” or “sometimes” in April 2016, up from 81% in October 2010;
- When asked if staff are good role models, 80% of youths answered “yes” or “sometimes” in April 2016, an increase from 73% in October 2010;
- When asked if staff seem to genuinely care about residents, over three-quarters of youths (77%) answered “yes” or “sometimes” in April 2016, up from 71% in October 2010; and
- When asked if staff make more positive comments to youth than negative comments, 74% of youths said “yes” or “sometimes” in April 2016, an increase from 67% of youths October 2010.

## Youths Reported More Contact with Family

In 2012, PbS launched the first national family standards initiative to strengthen and support relationships between incarcerated youths, their families and facility staff. The standards promote expanded visitation and contact opportunities for youths and families and increased communications between facility staff and families to best serve the youths. Research shows that increased family visitation and contact for youths in custody results in fewer behavioral incidents and better school performance (Agudelo, 2013).

- Overall, youths reporting phone calls increased just one percent to 88% in April 2016;
- In correction facilities, phone calls increased to 91% in April 2016 from 89% in October 2010;
- In detention facilities, phone calls decreased to 78% in April 2016 from 83% in October 2010; and
- In assessment facilities, phone calls increased to 89% in April 2016 from 76% in October 2010.

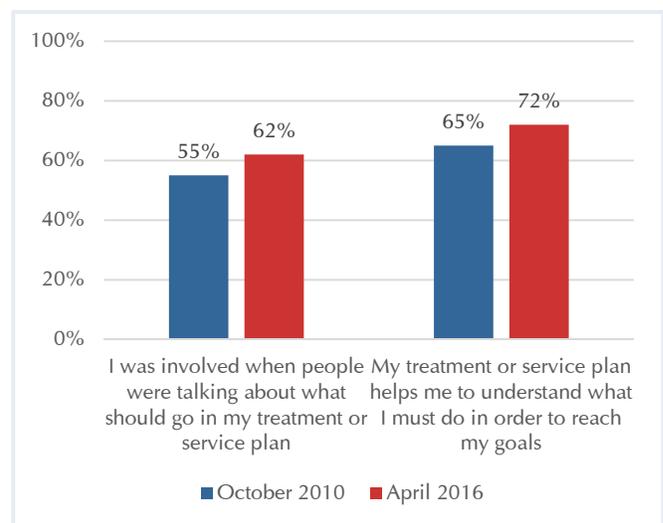
Additionally, since PbS started collecting data on family and social supports in October 2013, the percentage of youths who said that staff members were interested in what their family has to say has slightly increased to 66% in April 2016 from 64%.



## More Youths Reported Feeling Prepared to Return to Community

In 2001, PbS developed the Reintegration goal and standards to guide how correction facilities prepare youths to return to their families and communities while in custody. In 2015, PbS was awarded a grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) to develop standards to measure how and how well reentry services in facilities, as well as in the community, achieve positive youth outcomes. Reentry research is clear: successful transition from juvenile justice to the community requires planning from Day 1 and individualized treatment that meets youths' needs and builds on their strengths (Altschuler & Armstrong, 1994). Since October 2010, more youths in PbS facilities are becoming involved in and recognizing the value of treatment plans.

- The percentage of youths who reported they have a treatment plan increased to 61% in April 2016, up from 57% in October 2010;
- The percentage of youths who reported the programming is helping them to understand what they need to do to succeed when they return home increased to 79% in April 2016, up from 72% in October 2010; and
- In April 2016, 96% of youths reported they had someone to call when they need to talk or need help working out a problem when they leave. Of those, 35% identified family, 25% friends and 14% social worker/ case manager.



## Youths Respond to New Trauma-Informed Care Questions

Research shows that most youths involved in the juvenile justice system suffer from some form of trauma and traumatic stress, which frequently interferes with healthy child development and can affect a child's emotional management and response to stress long after the initial exposure (McEwen, 2008; Perry, 2008; Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). Following a 2013 partnership and pilot test with the Maine Department of Corrections, Division of Juvenile Services (DJS), 10 trauma-informed care-related questions were added to the Youth Climate Survey.

- In April 2014, 46% of youths said someone from the facility explained what trauma is and why it matters. This increased to 49% in April 2015 and 52% in April 2016; and
- Youths are also asked if someone from the facility asked them if any bad or upsetting things have ever happened to them. In April 2014, 53% of the youths said "yes." This steadily increased to 54% in April 2015 and again to 55% in April 2016.



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## PbS Issue Brief Series

*PbS recognizes that youths deserve to be treated as individuals with strengths and needs, within the context of their families. PbS is committed to treating all youths in custody as one of our own and providing national standards, outcome measures, a quality assurance process, training and technical assistance to help implement research-based and best practices. For more information, please visit: <http://pbstandards.org>.*

