



Performance-*based*  
Standards



## What Youths Say Matters

*October 2013*

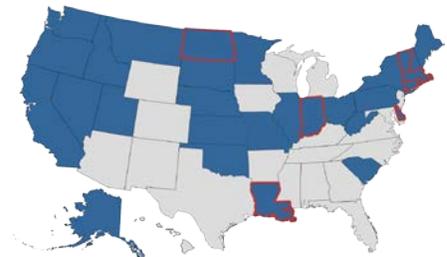
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## What Youths Say Matters – and Offers a Cost-Effective Approach to Reducing Recidivism

### Introduction

Research is mounting that shows youths' experiences while in residential programs have a significant impact on both the safety and climate within the facility as well as whether the youth continues to commit crimes when he or she returns to the community. A recent analysis of the Pathways to Desistance Study<sup>1</sup> added to the growing body of findings with two conclusions professionals can put into practice: 1) Youths who have generally positive experiences in custody are less likely to recidivate when released and 2) Surveying youths about their perceptions and experiences is a cost-effective means to reduce recidivism.

Performance-based Standards (PbS) is a national continuous improvement system that includes surveys of youths in residential placement as an integral component of its comprehensive approach to improving and monitoring conditions of confinement. PbS was launched by the Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) specifically to address safety, health and quality of life issues in youth facilities identified as problematic in the 1994 Conditions of Confinement Study. PbS established national standards for the highest quality facility operations, services and youths' daily experiences. PbS trains and supports participants to collect qualitative data – surveys of youths, staff and families - and quantitative administrative record and incident data and uses the information to implement reforms. Unlike other standards efforts, PbS focuses on using the information collected to promote best practices and on continually measuring facilities' safety, quality of life and services. PbS was a winner of the 2004 Innovations in American Government Award for uniquely and effectively addressing conditions of confinement.



Blue states have participating facilities; states outlined in red have community residential programs

PbS surveys youths, staff and families every April and October about conditions, safety, services, staff-youth relationships, contact with family, contact with lawyers and reentry preparedness. Almost 200 residential programs in 30 states and the District of Columbia participate in PbS, adhering to PbS' data quality requirements and sharing PbS' commitment to treating all youths in custody as one of our own.

<sup>1</sup> 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)



## Pathways to Desistance Research

The Pathways research<sup>2</sup> supports PbS research conducted in 2007, 2009 and 2011 that shows individual youths' experiences and perceptions impact outcomes, more so than the external influences on facilities which they cannot control, such as facility size or population.

The Pathways researchers looked at self-reported offending after release as well as arrest and return to residential settings and consulted with PbS' data and research in the development of the Pathways research components and questions. Pathways found youths perceiving 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. Additionally Pathways showed:

- Feeling safe reduces the probability of system involvement and antisocial activity (measures of re-offending) by about six percent compared with those who don't feel safe;
- Rating the facility as more fair reduces the probability of system involvement by seven percent and antisocial activity by 15 percent; and
- Facility climate, harshness and antisocial peers significantly impacted youths who self-reported continued offending.

Pathways researchers point out that asking youths questions about climate, safety, fear and fairness and analyzing the responses is a cost-effective and timely way for leaders and practitioners to significantly impact youths and long-term outcomes – adding to the evidence that PbS is a unique and effective tool to create and sustain positive outcomes for youths, staff and families.

## PbS Research

PbS conducts two different surveys of youths: a climate survey of youths during the months of April and October to capture their immediate perceptions of conditions and quality of life and an exit interview shortly before they are released to provide feedback on facility services, programming, staff; youths' preparation and feelings about leaving, connections with family and some of the same safety questions asked by the climate survey. Statistical analysis of the PbS information collected between 2004 and 2010 – the youth surveys as well as quantitative data from administrative forms and incident reports - continually showed that the greatest predictors of victimization and safety in facilities are youths' perceptions of the rules, staff, school and reports of whether or not they have been confined due to misbehavior.

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<sup>2</sup> The Pathways project is a longitudinal study of serious adolescent offenders from Philadelphia and Phoenix, interviewed at various points in time over seven years to learn about what makes them stop, or not stop, committing crime. It is an extensive database of interviews with the youths and collateral interviews and official records. The analysis of the youths' perception of institutional environments is one piece of the larger work and was drawn from a subset of about 500 the youths in the study.



The researchers concluded that in PbS facilities where youths understand the rules, view staff as helpful and school as good and do not report being locked down, youths are less likely to be afraid, to fight or be the victim of theft or abuse. PbS shared these findings with participating facility and agency leaders and provided guidance and strategies to change related practices, such as how the facility rules are communicated to youths, how staff interact with the youths, the quality of the school and use of isolation and room confinement. The 1994 Conditions of Confinement Study found that adhering to policy-based, pass/fail standards were ineffective and OJJDP charged PbS with developing outcome measures that regularly report what happens, what practices are implemented and what are the daily experiences of youths and staff.

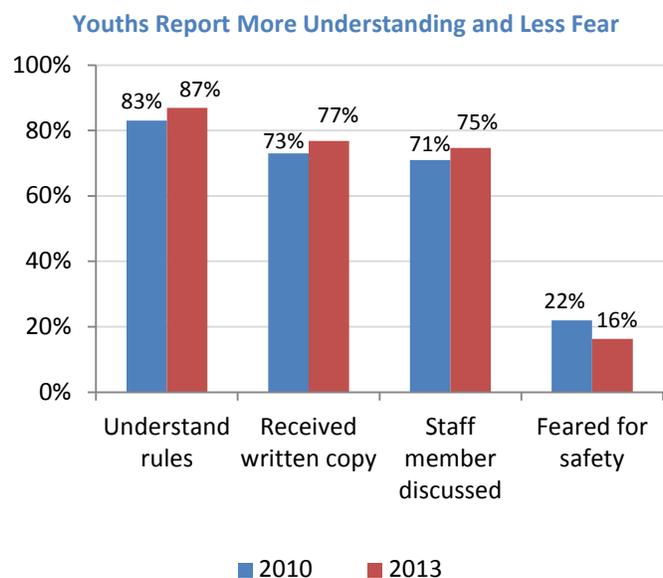
## Turning Research into Practice

As a result of the above research findings, PbS facility leaders targeted and made strategic reforms to improve the correlated PbS outcomes:

- Percent of youths who report knowing the facility rules
- Percent of youths who report staff as helpful and other positive qualities
- Percent of youths who report positively about school
- Percent of youths who report being locked down for misbehavior.

The results of the PbS Youth Climate Surveys over the past few years show that the research did lead to changes in practices and improved outcomes and youths perceptions. From April 2010 to April 2013, the most recent PbS data collection period, PbS participants increased the percentages of youths who reported they know the facility rules, received a written copy of the rules and discussed them with a staff member. Also during the same time period, PbS facilities saw a 27 percent reduction in the percentage of youths who feared for their safety, from 22 percent in 2010 to 16 percent in 2013.

PbS facilities survey a minimum random sample of 30 youths twice a year and recommends surveying all youths for the richest information. In April 2013, 3,758 youths completed the survey. In 2010, 5,728 youths completed the survey. In 2014, the PbS youth climate survey as well as the youth exit interview, staff climate survey and family survey will be available to complete on a mobile tablet.



## What the Youths Said

In addition to questions above about rules, safety and school, youths who responded to the PbS Youth Climate Survey in April 2013 told us:

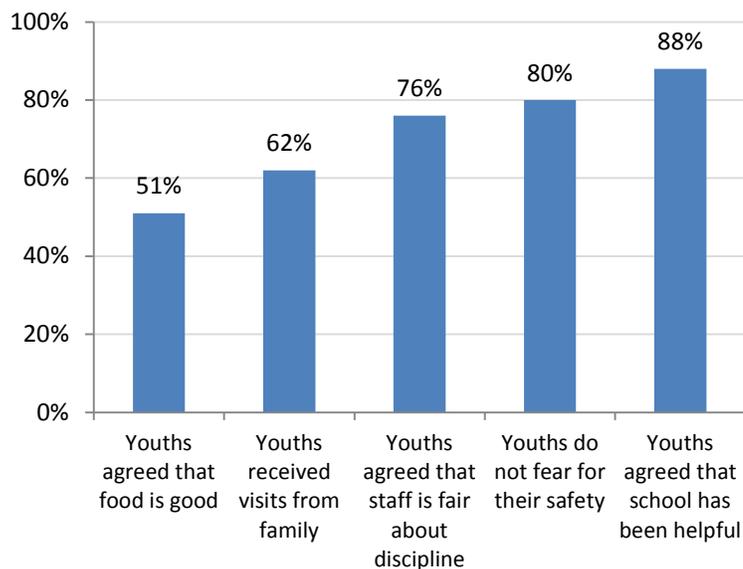
Living conditions are generally good.

- Most youths (92%) said that they had been given the required clothing and other items, 82 percent said that common areas were clean and 75 percent agreed that the facility was clean overall. The least satisfactory living condition was the food: 45 percent of the youths said food is not good, 51 percent said it is good.

Most youths and staff feel safe.

- The majority (80%) of youths reported they did not fear for their safety in April 2013, an increase from less than 75 percent in April 2010.
- Also in April 2013, most (78%) staff surveyed reported they did not fear for their safety. Most (78%) staff also rated the facility as safe or very safe for staff and 86 percent of staff rated the facility as safe or very safe for youths.

Youths' Perceptions



Family contact is important and difficult.

- A slight majority of youths (62%) received visits by their families while about one third (35%) did not.
- More than half of the youths who said they did not have visits said their families lived too far away, about one-quarter said their families didn't have transportation and about 12 percent of the youths said the visiting hours were not good for their families.

More staff are fair than are not fair.

- When asked if staff is fair about discipline issues, 38 percent of youths responded yes, another 38 percent responded sometimes and 21 percent responded no. Staff responded similarly: 72 percent said staff treat residents fairly, 26 percent said sometimes staff treat residents fairly and two percent said staff do not treat residents fairly.



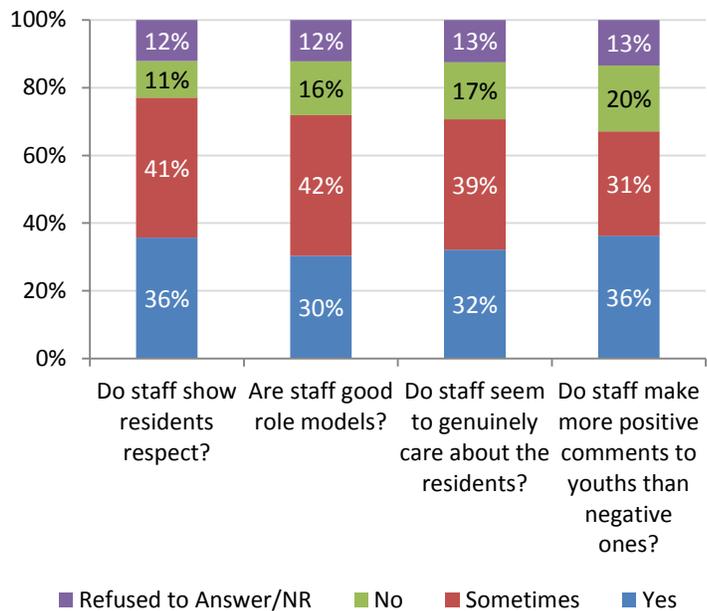
Programming and Services:

- Not quite two-thirds (65%) of youths said they had a treatment plan, 14 percent said they didn't know if they had a treatment plan and 17 percent said they did not have a treatment plan. Of those with treatment plans, 88 percent said they were involved in its planning and 91 percent said it helped them to understand what they needed to do to reach their goals.
- Most youths (90%) said they attended school at the facility (six percent said they already had earned a GED or high school diploma) and 88 percent said school has been helpful.
- Most (84%) said they had received medical care and it was helpful (91%).

## Staff-Youth Relationships

Researchers and experienced professionals agree that staff-youth relationships have the greatest influence on a youth's experience and perceptions of their time incarcerated and offer the single largest opportunity to impact safety and rehabilitation. In April 2013, most youths in PbS facilities reported that staff showed them respect, were good role models, seemed to genuinely care about them and made more positive than negative comments to youths. As juvenile justice behavior management practices become less adult and punishment-oriented, PbS will continue to report results of positive approaches as well as the consequences of negative responses.

Youths' Perceptions of Staff-Youth Relationships



## 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 all facilities and leaders to help implement research-based and best practices. For more information, please visit: <http://pbstandards.org>.*

