

FOCUS GROUP WITH MALES IN JUVENILE STRUCTURED DAY PROGRAM

Reducing Disproportionate Minority Contact in the Juvenile Justice System, Guilford County Demonstration Project



“If I would’ve had somebody to look up to, I wouldn’t have done this.”

METHODS

In the Spring of 2005, a focus group session was conducted with 10 African American males whose average age was 14 years old and who were participating in Guilford County’s Juvenile Structured Day Program. The goal of the session was to gain clearer awareness of the issues contributing to disproportionate minority contact in the juvenile justice system in Guilford County and it was conducted as a part of the Disproportionate Minority Contact in North Carolina’s Juvenile Justice System Project, funded by a grant from the NC Governor’s Crime Commission. The session was audio-recorded and transcribed. Findings and interpretations represent major themes and perspectives of the sessions as summarized by multiple observers and readers.

MAJOR THEMES

- > **Multiple factors contribute to disproportionate contact in the juvenile justice system.**
- > **Youth contend with issues of respect with adult authority figures.**
- > **Youth do not trust some adults.**
- > **Punishments may not be effective deterrents.**

MULTIPLE CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Most males believed their troubles with the juvenile justice system stem from growing up in crime-ridden neighborhoods, where too much unsupervised time led them to act out.

Some said their problems began because they were trying to fit in with older cousins who encouraged them to fight or to pick on other kids. Giving in to peer pressure, they sometimes engaged in delinquent behavior to win the respect of these older youth.

Most youth also mentioned that they did not feel like they had a meaningful relationship with a male role model. While they loved their mothers and cried when they saw their faces when they went to court, the boys felt like the females in their lives, their mothers, grandmothers, and sisters, did not always know what they were up to and could not provide the type of support they were seeking in a male mentor.

These youth also talked about the importance of appearing fearless and tougher than the next guy. For instance, rather than focusing on the punitive aspects of various court sanctions like curfews, the youth tended to vie with each other over whose restriction or sanction was harshest.

“Just do what you think you’re supposed to do... and don’t hang around the wrong crowd.”

“My neighborhood’s just bad. If you grow up in that neighborhood, you gonna be bad, too.”

ISSUES OF RESPECT

The African American youth often described adversarial relationships with adult authority figures, especially law enforcement and school resource officers. Moreover, these youth do not freely offer respect to adults whom they do not believe are treating them respectfully. In discussing an encounter with a school resource officer, one youth claims the officer asked, “What you doing with this on you, mixed breed n-word?”

“They be like, you little black-n, you know the racial word. And so that gives us the right to say something back to them.”

When asked directly about whether or not they believed race plays a role in their treatment, most believed they were

treated differently than their white peers. They discussed being singled out for harsher punishments by school officials, teachers, school resource officers, and patrol officers for engaging in the same behaviors as white youth, who were routinely ignored, released, or given minor sanctions.



“They was out to get me at this one school.”



“That first week I got suspended, and I hadn’t been doing nothing.”

ISSUES OF TRUST

Youth do not generally trust law enforcement officers, school resource officers, or school leaders, whom they believe are out to get them or to set them up for trouble. They believe they are targeted for punishment especially if they have committed prior offenses and are subjected to harsher treatment than white youth. Respondents believe that these authority figures term their behavior

“resistance” and take them to the police station while only questioning or searching white youth and letting them go. They described multiple examples of being detained, arrested, or charged for engaging in the same behavior as white youth who were routinely let go or ignored entirely.

These youth generally do not trust even those adults who should be

their advocates, like their juvenile court counselors. They believe court counselors are the same thing as probation officers and that their primary role is to monitor their probation and report back to the judge. They seem to view court counselors as extensions of a punitive court system rather than as advocates serving their best interests.

INEFFECTIVE DETERRENTS

Although youth discussed at length the discomfort of having to wear physical restraints that they saw as excessive and unnecessary (especially ankle shackles), there was little evidence that they viewed their experiences in the court system as a deterrent to future involvement. When asked directly if the discomfort of wearing

restraints might prevent them from getting into trouble again, they only gave short answers, like “uh-huh” or “yeah” and returned immediately to describing other uncomfortable experiences with handcuffs or waist chains. Clearly, they disliked these restraints, but they were not very interested in discussing any connection between those

experiences and future behavior.

Others said they would have to settle past injustices by fighting other kids when they returned to their former schools after leaving the Juvenile Structured Day Program, despite the likely consequences.