

FOCUS GROUP WITH CAREGIVERS OF COURT-INVOLVED YOUTH

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



METHODS

In the Spring of 2005, a focus group session was conducted with 6 African-American adults caring for court-involved youth, and included 3 mothers, 1 grandmother, 1 foster mother, and 1 aunt. 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, NC, 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.
- > Discipline and behavioral controls are often inappropriate and ineffective.
- > Communication from the school and court systems are not clear or adequate for caregivers.
- > Extracurricular school activities may be inaccessible or not culturally responsive to minority youth.

MULTIPLE CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

"It's like I didn't have support from anybody."



Respondents feel that children are marked by the contents of their school files and believe that school officials and teachers may be biased in their expectations and treatment youth if they see that prior disciplinary actions have been taken against them.

Caregivers are also concerned that early motherhood causes particular stress for young females who may act out in response to parental responsibilities they are not yet prepared to assume.

Other respondents said their own single-parent status often strained their abilities to provide the supervision they believe their children need now more than ever, while still meeting their financial responsibilities by working full-time, often at more than one job.

Similarly, respondents suggested that male mentors were especially needed as positive role models in their children's lives, but they are difficult to find.

Most respondents believe that school officials, especially School Resource Officers (SROs)

discriminate against African American youth, such as when they diagnosis their child with a mental or emotional condition or charge them with a criminal offense. Caregivers felt that there were more productive ways of addressing the issues underlying behavior problems, for example, by allowing youth to talk about their problems.

Caregivers were frustrated that children seem to receive appropriate treatment only after they



"He wants to come home, but I'd rather

are charged with a crime.

he stay. This way they have him right now, because he needs that help."

INAPPROPRIATE AND INEFFECTIVE BEHAVIOR CONTROLS

Most caregivers believe children who are first suspended for a minor school incident and are subsequently charged in court for the same offense are punished too severely. Minor infractions, they suggest, do not warrant court sanctions and should be handled by schools, as they believe they have been in the past.

Many respondents are concerned that school officials act too quickly to diagnose and medicate the problem behaviors of minority youth, and believe that some prescribed drugs even exacerbate behavior problems.



Most respondents also agreed that out-of-school suspension is simply an ineffective disciplinary action that lowers the self-esteem of youth. Students learn quickly how to behave in order to be sent home, where they would prefer to be.

“Throw him out of school, he’s at home. He’s not learning anything, and then he’s just sitting there like he’s a failure.”

Unsupervised by caregivers who are often working and unable to monitor their behavior, these youth frequently get into even more trouble when they are excluded from school.



“Where do we go from here?”

COMMUNICATION ISSUES

Caregivers do not feel they receive adequate communication from either the school or the court system regarding actions taken against their child.

Some said they first learned of ongoing school behavior problems when they received a notice requiring them to appear with their child at his or her upcoming court hearing.

As they attempt to guide their child through the court system,

they are generally overwhelmed by the process and do not feel they have adequate support or resources to understand the system or to assist their child.

However, most agreed that court counselors are helpful and wished that they were available to consult on other incidents, like those that occur in schools but do not actually go to court.

Respondents were disturbed

that such harsh punishments were routinely used in lieu of in-school suspension for minor behavioral problems.

Most caregivers do not understand or agree with the authority of SROs to punish youth and believe they are more likely to criminalize and charge youth for exhibiting behaviors that they believe should be managed by school officials, not judges.

INACCESSIBLE AND CULTURALLY UNINTERESTING EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Caregivers are concerned that extracurricular activities that may discourage problem behaviors when youth are most vulnerable, such as when they are unsupervised after school, are often inaccessible to youth who do not meet school eligibility criteria to participate, such as maintaining high grades.

Others said that even if youth were allowed to participate, activities are typically designed to appeal to the cultural interests of white youth, not those of minority youth.

The lack of engaging, culturally-appropriate after-school activities was a particular concern for these caretakers who believe such

activities could provide the type of support and help single women need to ensure their children are not engaging in delinquent behaviors while they are working and unavailable to monitor their children after school.