

Greater CLE Youth Justice Collective: Amplifying Youth Voice: Focus Groups

March 2025



The Greater CLE Youth Justice Collective, made up of the ACLU of Ohio, Children's Law Center, and the Schubert Center for Child Studies at Case Western Reserve University, engaged in a series of focus groups with Cleveland youth in order to understand how negative framing in the media and elsewhere can affect kids who are impacted by the criminal legal system.

Our Collective Goals are to:

1. Combat harmful rhetoric on safety and youth.
2. Humanize Cleveland's youth with the understanding that all kids are kids.
3. Foster greater understanding and empathy among policymakers, law enforcement, and the broader community.

Key Themes that Emerged from Youth Conversations

Safety is Complex

"Safety means having people you can trust to protect you, but we don't have that here."

- Laura (F, 14-18 yrs)



Guns Have a Dual Role

"It feels like you have to choose between being a target or having protection."

- Fred (M, 14-18 yrs)



Grief and Loss are Pervasive

"Every time I lose someone; it feels like a part of me is gone too. How can you feel safe when that keeps happening?"

- David (M, 18-25 yrs)



Protective Factors & Caring Adults

(I wish) "adults would come at us with love, telling (us) 'Come on, I got you. You need help...'"

- Vera (F, 14-18 yrs)



Trauma is Generational, Normalized & Compromises Mental Health

"Trauma runs deep, and we don't have anyone to help us heal."

- Cosby (M, 14-18 yrs)



- Nearly half of the kids said guns became a survival instinct.
- The young people consistently connected mental health challenges to unresolved generational trauma, underscoring how grief and loss perpetuate cycles of harm.
- Over 2/3 of the girls and young women spoke specifically about intergenerational trauma.
- The teens mentioned sports, music, writing, art, drawing, journaling, and photography as helpful coping mechanisms that keep youth grounded and focused.
- Over 60% of youth lost at least one person to guns.

Key Themes continued

Community Culture: Belonging & Neglect

"A strong community means there's always someone looking out for you, but that doesn't happen here anymore."

- Janice (F, 25+ yrs)



"The people in my community are resilient; they support each other through tough times."

-Tim (M, 18-25 yrs)



Desire for Inclusion in Decision Making

"If we're not included, how can we trust the system to work for us?"

- Theo (M, 18-25 yrs).



Cleveland Has Work to Do

"If I stay here, It's like I'm stuck in this cycle. I've gotta get out to have a chance at something better."

- Gabe, (M, 14-18 yrs)



Racial and Economic Disparities Harm Youth

"We're guilty before we even speak."

- Jerry (M, 18-25 yrs)



Social Media Affects our Youth

"Rumors going to spread regardless, you hear it anyway. It just Cleveland. He can know and tell me, everybody just running their mouth for real. Word of mouth, social media, people figure out, regardless, if somebody died today, we will know about it by tomorrow."

Carl, (M, 18-24 yrs)



Aspirations and Hope for their Future

"I dream of becoming an entrepreneur and creating opportunities for others."

- Aaron (M, 14-18)



"Career training programs would make a big difference in my life."

- Elliot (M, 14-18), JDC.



Engagement Pool:

61 Total Participants

By Gender

- 42, Male
- 19, Female

By Age

- 25, 17 and below
- 29, 18-25
- 7, 25+

By Zipcode

- 41, High Priority Zip Codes
- 17, Moderate Priority Zip Codes
- 2, Unknown Zip Codes
- 1, Lowest Priority Zip Code

Population Group

Adults & parents
9.8%

Recently released
14.8%

Young adults
34.4%

Court program
14.8%

Incarcerated CCJDC
26.2%

