

Greater CLE Youth Justice Collective: Amplifying Youth Voice: Listening Sessions

September 2026



Between 2022-2024, there was a rise in negative press where young Clevelanders were villainized by the media and cited as a significant source of crime in the city. The ACLU of Ohio and the Children's Law Center set out to address this false narrative and hear from youth directly.

In 2025, the ACLU of Ohio and the Children's Law Center ran solutions focused listening sessions with Cleveland area youth, speaking to 53 total participants from heavily impacted zip codes to gather feedback on what actions they would like to see take place to prevent further youth entanglement with the criminal legal system.

A listening session is a conversation with groups or individuals to solicit feedback on select topics in a nonacademic and free flowing manner. The loosened structure provides participants with the freedom to explore topics, give honest feedback, and, in our case, find solutions.

Five listening sessions were conducted in partnership with the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Detention Center, Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court Probation Department, The SPOT, A Place 4 Me, and The LGBT Community Center of Cleveland.

Listening Session Demographics

53 Total Participants

By Gender:

Genderfluid.....1
Unknown..... 1
Female..... 20
Male.....30

By Age:

Unknown.....8
18-26.....22
13-17.....23

By Race:

Middle Eastern.... 1
White.....4
Unknown.....4
Mixed Race..... 6
Black.....37

By Location:

With Probation Service.... 4
In the Community..... 22
In the CCJDC.....27

Key Themes

Youth-Specific Safe Third Spaces

- Youth highlighted a lack of spaces built just for them that were safe for “teens to be teens.”
- Importantly, youth emphasized needing these spaces for evenings and after school.
- Many youth shared a recurring desire for all-encompassing community centers, spanning ages and interests, that have something for everyone, including reading rooms and free gaming stations with WIFI, in addition to sports equipment.
- Youth emphasized these spaces should be free to use, accessible by bus, and without advance signups for programs or classes. Essentially, youth are seeking drop in spaces which can be self-guided.

Skill Building and Financial Literacy

- Youth mentioned needing money and seeking better ways to achieve legitimate employment as a tool to keep them away from more dangerous activities.
- Youth seek classes and mentors who can teach them life skills like **financial management, trades, and the arts**. There was a strong prevailing sentiment that these courses must be **free, accessible, and well-promoted**. Again, youth emphasized drop in style opportunities would reach more young people than limited advance sign up sessions. There was also a desire for peer mentors for skill building.



What Cleveland Can Do

- Invest in spaces and programs that allow teens to be teens in our City's most impacted areas.
- Build relationships with community organizations and local job training centers to provide information for young people in accessible ways.
- Continue and expand work already being done in local libraries and rec centers to meet communities where they are with particular emphasis on young people.
- Expand our view of Cleveland's young people — regardless of zipcode — and work to provide them the tools they need to be successful.
- Speak of Cleveland's youth as already capable, proud citizens of our city who do not want to be treated with fear and distrust, but **with respect and care for their past, present, and future**.