



Youth Views on Access to Justice

Youth would like to see more diverse representation among staff in justice system institutions, such as the courts and the police force. If there were more diverse decision-makers, particularly more Indigenous representation, youth believe that there would be better access to justice for all Canadians.

From 2016 to 2019, the Department of Justice Canada reached out to young Canadians for their views on justice issues. The youth selected for these youth engagement projects were not provided with specialized training or information, but their opinions and perspectives on justice issues can inform policy decisions, including public information campaigns.

What we found¹

- Many youth, including Indigenous youth, felt that the lack of diverse representation among police and other authority figures in the criminal justice system leads to discrimination.
- Youth believed that there needs to be more attention on rural and isolated communities that lack resources and have limited access to justice, especially in Northern Canada. Youth would like to see a strong investment in culturally-relevant resources in these communities.
- Many young people wanted improved access to mental health services for victims, offenders, and their families.
- Young people noted that they perceive the justice system as unfair when they (or their families, friends, peers, other community members) experience negative encounters with police, who tend to be their first point of contact with the justice system.
- Young people wanted to understand their rights and what resources are available to help. Many youth indicated that they lack a good understanding of the law and how it affects them.
- Although school would be the preferred option to access legal information for most young people, youth felt that many schools are not yet equipped to help students access justice.

In more depth

In our discussions, youth talked about the importance of Canadian justice institutions reflecting the diversity of Canadian society. Youth advocated for providing more supportive mentors to young, disadvantaged people, as this could encourage more youth to practise law or to pursue other careers

related to justice. Indigenous and black youth should further be encouraged to pursue justice-related careers through grants and scholarships. To achieve better retention of diverse groups in school programs, Indigenous and black students should be able to see themselves (their culture, beliefs, values, morals, experiences) reflected in the educational system so that they feel included and connected.

Some young people believed that police do not respond adequately to serious accounts of injustice. They also expressed concerns that sometimes police are identified as perpetrators of unfair treatment. Young people would like to know how to file a police complaint. Young people supported efforts to bolster relationships between police and the public.

Youth also wanted first responders to know how to effectively work with people who are experiencing mental health challenges.

Regarding education, young people believed that teachers and school staff do not understand the social and economic challenges that youth face. Young people would like to see more professional development for teachers and other staff focusing on access to justice, fairness and cultural sensitivity. They would like to see increased school staff diversity (particularly more Indigenous staff) and more emphasis in the Civics and Career courses in high school on legal rights and where to seek legal assistance. Youth recommended free workshops and programs to support youth who have been in contact with the law, and community workers who could act as adult allies for youth when there is a conflict with their parent or guardian.

Overall, in their own words:

“Justice should not only be for people who have resources and privilege, it should be equitable for all races, ethnicities, religions, and backgrounds”.

Method

Justice Canada, in partnership with the Students Commission of Canada,² conducted youth engagement projects from 2016 to 2019. Each project explored youths’ views, perceptions and expectations of the criminal justice system. This was done through developing and hosting a Justice Youth Action Committee,³ gathering opinions through youth-led Community Action Projects,⁴ and hosting the #CanadaWeWant Conference.⁵ The findings summarized in this document are from the *Youth Engagement on the Criminal Justice System* project 2018-19.

Youth Engagement on the Criminal Justice System Project 2018-19: Fifteen Justice Youth Action Committee members representing Indigenous, non-Indigenous, rural, urban, and other diverse populations joined bi-weekly calls, as well as engaged with justice material through a Facebook group and a Messenger group from June 2018 to April 2019. In March 2019, over 150 youth participants from across Canada gathered for the annual #CanadaWeWant Conference; 18 young people from the conference took the lead to produce recommendations for Justice Canada and collectively affirm their recommendations with all of the conference participants. This project focused on multiple issues

relevant to the work of Justice Canada. For the purpose of this Research at a Glance, the focus was on access to justice.

This summary focused on the voices gathered from the youth participants at the 2019 #CanadaWeWant Conference. The conference participants who generated and affirmed recommendations were young people from every province and territory, representing diverse identities, including various racial, ethnic, religious, and gender identities. The majority of the 18 youth leads identified as Indigenous.

For further information on the findings and/or surveys mentioned in this document, please contact the Department of Justice’s Research and Statistics Division (rsd.drs@justice.gc.ca)

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all findings are from the Youth Engagement on the Criminal Justice System Project 2018-19.

² The Students Commission of Canada is a national charitable organization with a mission to support young people in putting their ideas for improving themselves and their communities into action. The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement is a network of youth, youth organizations and academics focused on providing evidence on the benefits of youth engagement and positive youth development.

³ The Students Commission selected members to join the Youth Action Committee for Justice Canada. The youth selected were from across the country, aged between 12 and 22 years, lived in urban and rural communities, were from diverse backgrounds and cultures, and had varied life experiences.

⁴ Community action projects required Youth Action Committee members to go into their communities and gather data from their peers using the survey questions identified on the calls. Youth could deliver a survey, a focus/discussion group, or interviews to collect this data.

⁵ At the “Canada We Want” conference, the *CJS theme team* (a diverse group of youth from across Canada) generated recommendations for policy makers and other young Canadians regarding the criminal justice system.