



# Looking Ahead at Canada’s Justice System: What’s Important to Youth?

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When thinking of justice in the future, young people focused mostly on issues related to the criminal justice system, such as addressing root causes of crime, increasing access to legal resources, addressing Indigenous rights and issues, as well as supporting all parties involved with the system (e.g. survivors, perpetrators and communities).

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**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 found<sup>1</sup>

- Most youth identified at least one medium-term goal that focused on prevention, such as increasing support for vulnerable populations, addressing the root causes of crime, and increasing mental health supports.
- Youth would like to see increased use of specialized justice responses, focused on healing, reparations and reintegration, instead of punishment, in order to reduce the number of incarcerated people.
- Many youth believed that it is important to address the lack of affordability and accessibility of legal services in order to support vulnerable populations.
- Youth also saw evolving technology and the world of social media as issues that the justice system will face in the next few years. Young people believed there is a need to identify ways to keep Canadians and their information safe and secure.
- Young people would like more information about the legal system, as many youth are unaware of their rights and therefore do not know when their rights are violated or where to seek legal assistance.
- According to youth, the most prominent challenge that justice will face relates to Indigenous rights and issues, especially concerning reconciliation. They recommended educating Canadians about Indigenous history and the relationship between the government and Indigenous communities.

### In more depth

Youth believed that root causes of crime could be addressed by reducing discrimination and racism in the justice system in order to ensure fair treatment for all people (particularly, Indigenous people).

Young people would like to see increased education, awareness and supports to help prevent and address addiction and the growing opioid crisis.

When discussing specialized justice practices, youth identified the need to use restorative practices in communities in order to encourage offenders to repair the harm they caused. Youth would also like to see more grassroots groups provide these services and for government to guarantee increased and consistent funding to support these groups.

Another issue that youth raised was the need for increased transparency and communication between the government and the public. Young people believed that there needs to be a consent process in order to share data among government bodies, as youth would like more clarity and communication around what happens with information collected by the government, why it is shared, and with whom.

Young people would also like to see a greater focus on supports for victims and survivors of crime, as well as for family members and friends of those involved with the justice system. Some supports proposed include hosting education campaigns to help change people's attitudes and perceptions about victims and survivors of sexual violence. They also suggested limiting pre-trial negotiations and plea bargains without victims' consent.

When discussing Indigenous rights and issues, youth would like to see an increase in accessible resources and services as well as in supports for mental health and addiction challenges in Indigenous communities. Youth also believed that the lack of Indigenous representation in the police and court systems in many Northern communities, the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the justice system and the cycle of offending and reoffending all need to be addressed in order to increase trust in these institutions.

Overall, in their own words, youth thought:

*People of colour, especially Indigenous peoples, need to be heard on what things they want to change and how they want to be treated and seen differently to the whole world and the legal system.*

### Method

Justice Canada, in partnership with the Students Commission of Canada,<sup>2</sup> conducted youth engagement projects from 2016 to 2019. Each project has explored youths' views, perceptions and expectations of the CJS. This was done through developing and hosting a Justice Youth Action Committee,<sup>3</sup> gathering opinions through youth-led Community Action Projects,<sup>4</sup> and hosting the #CanadaWeWantConference.<sup>5</sup> 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 (CJS) Project 2018-2019:** 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 Messenger group from June 2018 to April 2019. This project had an issue-based focus relevant to the work of Justice Canada.

This summary focused on data gathered from two sources:

- 1) The Justice YAC members' voices; they came from almost every province and territory in the country, and represented diverse identities, including racial, ethnic, religious, and gender identities. The Justice YAC members engaged in discussions about what they believe will affect the justice system in the upcoming years. Youth also discussed how they believe the justice system should look like in the next few years.
- 2) The development of a survey that was shared by Justice YAC members as well as through organizational partners and social media. In total, 104 youth responded to the survey.

When relevant, the findings from the conference were incorporated into this research at a glance. **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](mailto:rsd.drs@justice.gc.ca))**

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

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Community action projects required YAC (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.

<sup>5</sup> 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.