



# Youth Views on Collaborating to Support Individuals with Mental Health and Addiction Issues in the Criminal Justice System

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Youth believe that collaboration between government departments, institutions (e.g., police, schools, and medical centres), community programs, and services is necessary to better support individuals with mental health and addiction challenges in the criminal justice system (CJS).

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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>

- Many youth believed that mental health programs and services (e.g., therapy, counselling, and support groups) need to be more accessible and available in communities, in schools, and in the CJS.
- Youth noted that collaboration between different organizations could improve the accessibility of preventative measures (e.g., education, recognition, and support). For those already in the CJS, youth would like to see more rehabilitative and reintegrating supports (e.g. counselling).
- Youth also believed that collaboration would help de-stigmatize mental health, create safe spaces for discussion and sharing, educate the public, and provide programs and services that support people with mental health and addiction issues.
- Youth would like those working in institutions and systems (e.g., police officers, parole officers, judges, teachers, guidance counsellors, and school administrators) to be trained on mental health and addictions, mental health first aid, and cultural sensitivities to help dismantle systemic biases.

- Youth believed that the general public needs to be informed about mental health and addictions in order to recognize when people are facing these issues, especially if they become involved in the CJS. Many suggested collaborative approaches to increase training on these issues (e.g. CJS workshops in schools or school-police partnerships).

### In more depth

Youth believed that community-based organizations and social services, including health centres, housing organizations, youth organizations (e.g. Boys and Girls Clubs and Native Friendship Centres), and international organizations (e.g. UNICEF) should collaborate.

Young people felt that various systems should work together to support people with mental health and addiction challenges. For instance, they imagined a network of support for Canadians, comprised of medical professionals, legal experts, and caring individuals. Youth believed that such a network would help to end stigma, reduce crime, and lead to safe, healthier neighbourhoods.

Youth wanted CJS professionals to better understand mental health and addictions in order to improve rehabilitation, reintegration, and support programs.<sup>2</sup> They suggested that a case manager role within the CJS could provide treatments plans, coordinate resources, and provide guidance and follow-up regarding treatment plans. Youth believed that people involved in the CJS specifically need supports to complete their education, find housing, attain employment, and access therapy/medical support, in order to reintegrate back into their communities.

A number of youth viewed it as their role to educate and support their peers by sharing their own mental health experiences and by being informed allies. Many suggested creating or joining youth committees to bring awareness to mental health issues in their communities, while other youth believe there needs to be workshops and other learning opportunities in schools, as well as access to psychologists/psychiatrists, counsellors, and other mental health experts in school settings.

A small number of youth believed there is a need to engage people with mental health and addiction challenges as well as their friends and loved ones to provide real-life experience and knowledge in order to develop, shape, and deliver meaningful and effective support services.

In their own words,

*“Mental health is a collective problem so that means that we all need to come together in attempt to combat the problem as a whole.”*

### Method

Justice Canada, in partnership with the Students Commission of Canada,<sup>3</sup> conducted youth engagement projects from 2016 to 2019. Each project explored youths’ views, perceptions and expectations of the CJS. This was done through developing and hosting a Justice Youth Action

Committee (YAC)<sup>4</sup>, gathering opinions through youth-led Community Action Projects,<sup>5</sup> and hosting the #CanadaWeWant Conference.<sup>6</sup> The findings summarized in this document are from the youth engagement on the CJS project 2018.

**Youth Engagement on the Criminal Justice System Project 2018:** 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.

In collaboration with Justice Canada, the SCC developed a questionnaire that was shared by Justice YAC members and SCC network partners through an online google survey, a paper survey, and discussion groups. In September and October 2018, 90 youth voices were collected, representing diverse young people from across Canada, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, including various genders, races, ethnicities, and people from rural and urban areas.

**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.

<sup>2</sup> Though some CJS facilities that focus on treatment exist, they are limited and therefore, not available or accessible for everyone.

<sup>3</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>4</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>5</sup> Community action projects required YAC 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>6</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.