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Youth Leadership in Planning a Cook County Police Deflection Program



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Alex Menninger, Project Manager

Katherine Wilson McCoy, Research Fellow

Boya Lin, Research Intern

Jessica Reichert, Senior Research Scientist

Abstract:

Police deflection programs offer an alternative to arrest by connecting youth to community-based services during police encounters. The Chicagoland Youth Deflection Initiative (CYDI), which allows officers to refer youth encountered during motor vehicle stops to community-based supports, established a Youth Advisory Board (YAB) to incorporate youth perspectives into the planning process for development of the program. This evaluation documents youth participation in the planning process using survey responses and observations of YAB meetings. Youth reported feeling comfortable participating and identified key considerations for the program's design, including trust, equitable implementation, and the role of law enforcement. Perceptions of the program's potential benefits varied across meetings, and youth expressed interest in continued involvement. Findings describe how youth engaged in the planning process for the program and highlight considerations for structuring youth advisory boards, including facilitation, sustained engagement, and compensation or professional development opportunities.

Introduction

Connecting youth to community-based services instead of arrest can reduce unnecessary involvement in the criminal justice system and improve access to supportive resources.¹ However, during most police encounters, officers have limited formal mechanisms to refer youth to community-based services as an alternative to arrest or system processing. This gap has particular consequences for Black and Latino youth, who experience disproportionately high rates of police contact and arrest.² Police deflection programs address this gap by creating structured pathways for officers to connect youth to community-based supports in lieu of arrest.³

Deflection programs designed to assist youth should obtain youth input to improve buy-in and program sustainability.⁴ One way to do this is to create a board composed of youth members.⁵ Board membership provides youth with leadership experience, thereby promoting youth empowerment and positive development. In turn, programs are enhanced by incorporating youth voices.⁶

What Is the CYDI Program?

The Chicagoland Youth Deflection Initiative (CYDI) is a youth deflection program established in Cook County, Illinois, and funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS). CYDI provides an alternative to arrest when Illinois State Police (ISP) encounter youth during motor vehicle stops. During these encounters, officers may refer youth to deflection specialists from Treatment Alternatives for Safe Communities, Inc. (TASC), who offer voluntary connections to community-based services and supports.

CYDI was launched in May 2025. To support development of the program in the months leading up to its launch, TASC's Center for Health and Justice (TASC CHJ) convened and facilitated a series of action-planning meetings with Chicago's Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS), local social service providers, and ISP representatives. Of the nine action-planning meetings, four were dedicated to incorporating youth perspectives into program planning. To achieve this aim, TASC CHJ and DFSS established a Youth Advisory Board (YAB) comprised of young people aged 14-24. Seven service agencies involved in the Chicago Youth Intervention Pathways

(YIP) diversion program were responsible for recruiting YAB members and providing transportation to YAB meetings. Adult service coordinators recruited young people who were currently or previously engaged with their agency's services and attended YAB meetings alongside youth attendees. YAB members received food and a \$20 gift card for attending at least one meeting session.

How Did We Evaluate CYDI's Advisory Board?

At the conclusion of each of the YAB meetings, participants completed a survey that included items addressing four areas:

- Demographics (6 items).
- Experiences during the meeting (4 items).
- Perceptions of whether the appropriate individuals were involved in the CYDI program (2 items).
- Perceived benefits of the CYDI program (1 item).

Across the four meetings, the number of survey responses ranged from 16 to 26.

Surveys were completed by both youth and the adults who accompanied them.

Analyses of youth experiences and perceptions are based solely on youth responses.

Responses from accompanying adults were reviewed separately to provide additional context. Items were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale (e.g., 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*), and 1 (*Horrible*) to 5 (*Excellent*)).

In addition to surveys, the evaluation team conducted 37 hours of field observations of action-planning and YAB meetings. Notes from these observations were reviewed and summarized to identify key themes related to youth participation, feedback, and program development.

What Were Our Key Findings?

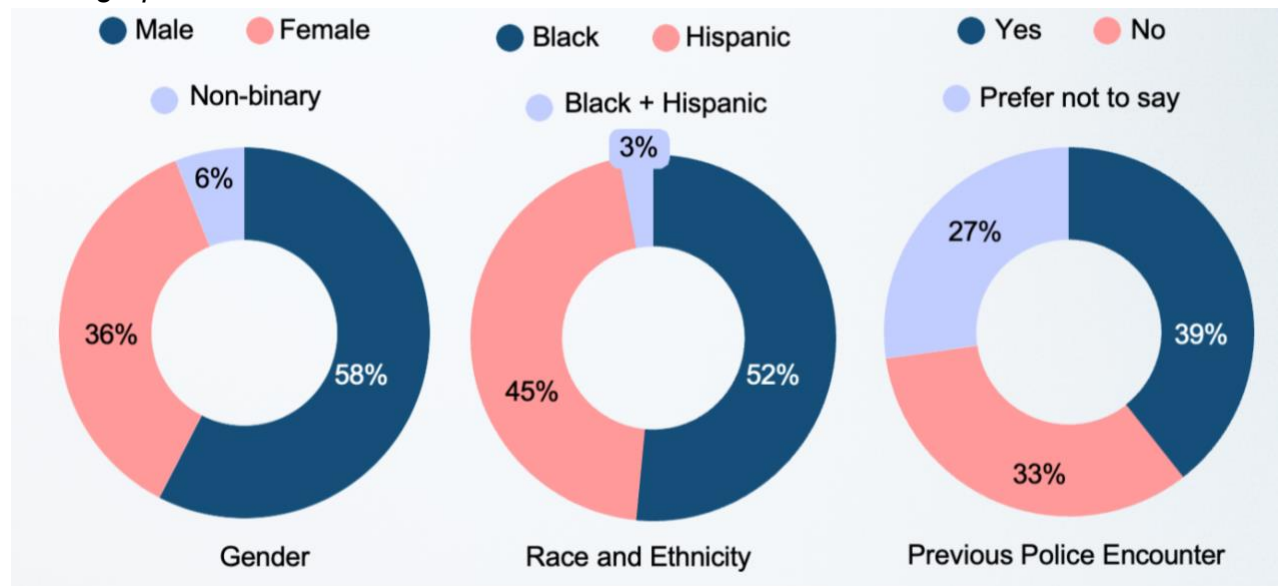
YAB Meetings and Membership

Non-YAB and YAB meetings were held in an alternating sequence, with YAB meetings offering youth the opportunity to review the development of the proposed CYDI implementation action plan and share their input. YAB meetings also offered service providers and the program development team a chance to improve their understanding of youth perspectives and make appropriate changes to the program design to reflect these perspectives. Facilitators carefully structured the meetings to support confidentiality, respectful dialogue, and the empowerment of youth voices.

The meetings were attended by approximately 55 people: 33 youth, 17 accompanying service providers, and five other program stakeholders. Of the 33 youth, 18 attended one meeting, 15 attended two or more meetings, and four attended all four meetings. All youth members participated in a social service program, and several self-identified with prior involvement in the juvenile justice system. The mean age of youth participants was 16.6, and the median age was 16 (range 14 to 22). The slight majority of youth were male, and all were either Black, Hispanic, or both (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Demographics of YAB Members



Note. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

YAB Meeting Discussions

Meetings began with youth attendees sharing why they were helping to develop the CYDI program. The motivations cited centered around a shared desire to improve communities, enhance youth safety, ensure that youth voices are heard, and provide input on community-police relations. Building upon this foundation, the facilitators led the youth attendees through several worksheets and group discussions to gather feedback on key components of the proposed program. Throughout the feedback sessions, youth attendees provided thoughtful input, suggested changes to the program design, and advocated for increased officer and community awareness of the program.

The youth attendees shared:

- Skepticism that the program would be utilized equitably and consistently by ISP officers.
- A desire to have police officers attend the YAB meetings.
- Frustration that the program was starting with ISP officers rather than Chicago Police Department officers, who were perceived as having a greater impact.
- Feedback that they feel unsafe and inauthentic in spaces, such as the YAB meetings or a potential deflection program, where trust has not been established, especially when working with unfamiliar adults or agencies.

This feedback led to conversations about the need to have the right people at the table and for genuine respect and engagement between program stakeholders and the community.

Tensions occasionally arose, such as when service coordinators spoke over the youth attendees or asked them to divulge personal information. Facilitators were quick to step in to encourage equitable participation. Despite these challenges, the meetings ended with participants sharing their gratitude and youth attendees expressing their interest in continuing to be included in the work.

YAB Participation

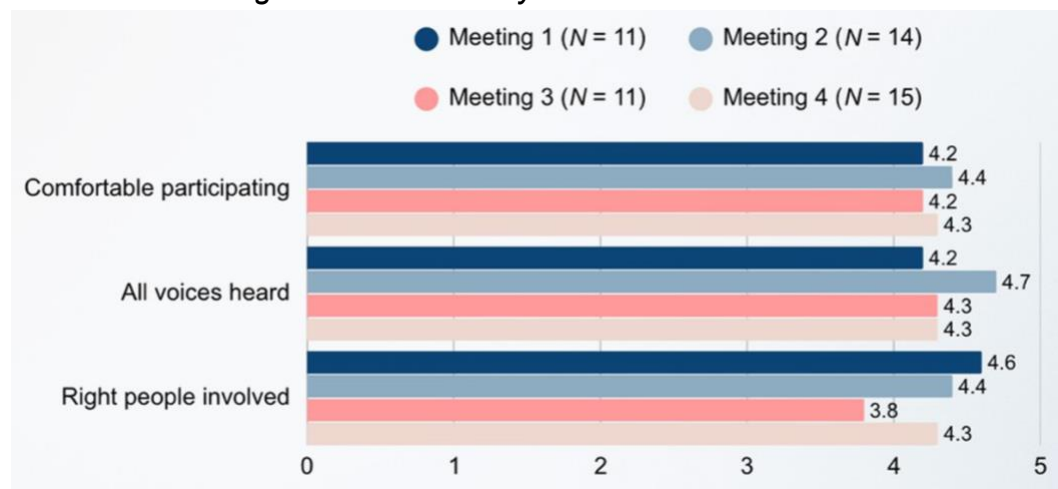
We observed that the youth attendees remained actively engaged in the YAB meetings. The structured activities and targeted questions seemed to draw out meaningful feedback. Given the high level of participation, the CYDI leadership team (comprised of representatives from DFSS, ISP, and the local service coordinators) considered strategies to sustain youth engagement beyond the planning phase, which youth members supported both during YAB discussions and in survey feedback.

YAB Feedback

Survey responses indicated that the youth attendees felt comfortable together and that all voices were heard. (See Figure 2, which shows responses only from YAB youth members.) Youth rated each meeting on a Likert scale from 1 (*Horrible*) to 5 (*Excellent*), with a mean of 4.1 to 4.4. Youth ratings of the program's potential benefits declined from 4.6 at the second meeting to 3.6 at the third meeting, which may reflect shifting perceptions as the program design was discussed in greater detail. Ratings of the program's potential benefits and perceptions that appropriate individuals were involved increased by the final meeting. Open-ended survey responses also indicated that youth attendees wanted to remain involved in program implementation and operations.

Figure 2

YAB Members' Agreement to Survey Items



Note. Surveys were completed by both youth attendees and accompanying adults; however, the analyses presented in Figure 2 reflect only youth responses.

Implementing Feedback

Following the YAB meetings, CYDI stakeholders from TASC CHJ, DFSS, and ISP discussed how to incorporate youth feedback into both program design and future YAB meetings. Stakeholders agreed that a key step would be to identify motivators for maintaining YAB participation, including offering compensation or professional development opportunities for youth.

Main Takeaways

The Youth Advisory Board provided a structured opportunity for Chicago youth to participate in the planning of a police deflection program:

- Youth actively engaged in the planning process and provided feedback on key aspects of program design, including concerns about trust, equitable implementation, and the role of law enforcement.
- Survey responses and observations indicate that youth generally felt comfortable participating and believed their perspectives were heard, though perceptions of the program's potential benefits varied across meetings.
- Youth and program stakeholders expressed interest in maintaining ongoing youth involvement beyond the planning phase and identified compensation, professional development, and facilitation approaches as important factors for sustaining participation.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Menninger, A. T., Wilson McCoy, K., Lin, B., & Reichert, J. (2026). *Youth leadership in planning a Cook County police deflection program*. Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority.

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