

9 YOUTH VOICE IN JUVENILE JUSTICE

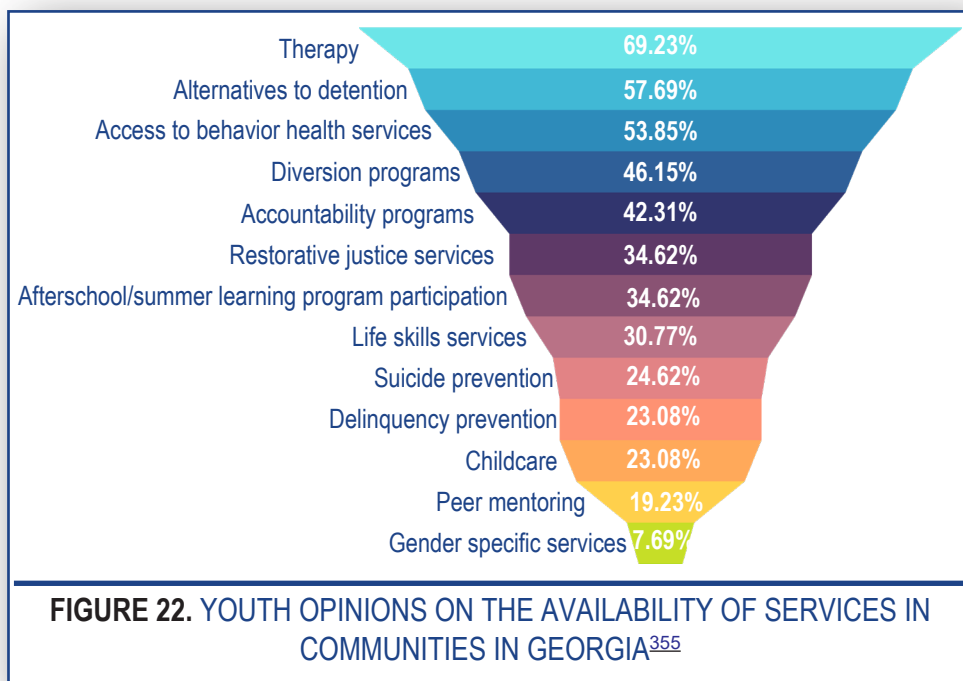
Although quantitative individual court and state agency data is imperative to understanding how the juvenile justice system can affect youth, it does not tell the whole story. Youth voice is a necessary component in any authentic movement toward change. While incorporating youth voice in advocacy is becoming more prolific in community and nonprofit organizations, it is not widely used in Georgia's juvenile justice system beyond reentry planning.

In 2023, the Juvenile Justice State Advisory Group of the CJCC conducted a statewide community feedback survey to inform Title II funding allocation. The survey had more than 600 respondents, 43 of which were youth. Of these youth respondents, 37 were currently involved in the juvenile justice system or had prior involvement. The findings shared in this report were from the youth responses only.

Most of the youths surveyed believed their communities have a juvenile crime problem, and **only 50% of youth said they felt safe in their communities. Among the reasons listed as the cause of crime in their communities,**

the most cited were gang issues, lack of parental involvement or supervision, lack of structured activities, and inadequate services and resources. Youth respondents reported the following behaviors — substance abuse, mental illness, truancy, bullying, and gang activity — as occurring most frequently.³⁵³

Regarding available community services for youth and their peers, therapy, detention alternatives, and access to behavioral health services ranked in the top three. (See **Figure 22** below.) However, **on a scale of 1 to 100, youth ranked ease of access to services at 50.**³⁵⁴

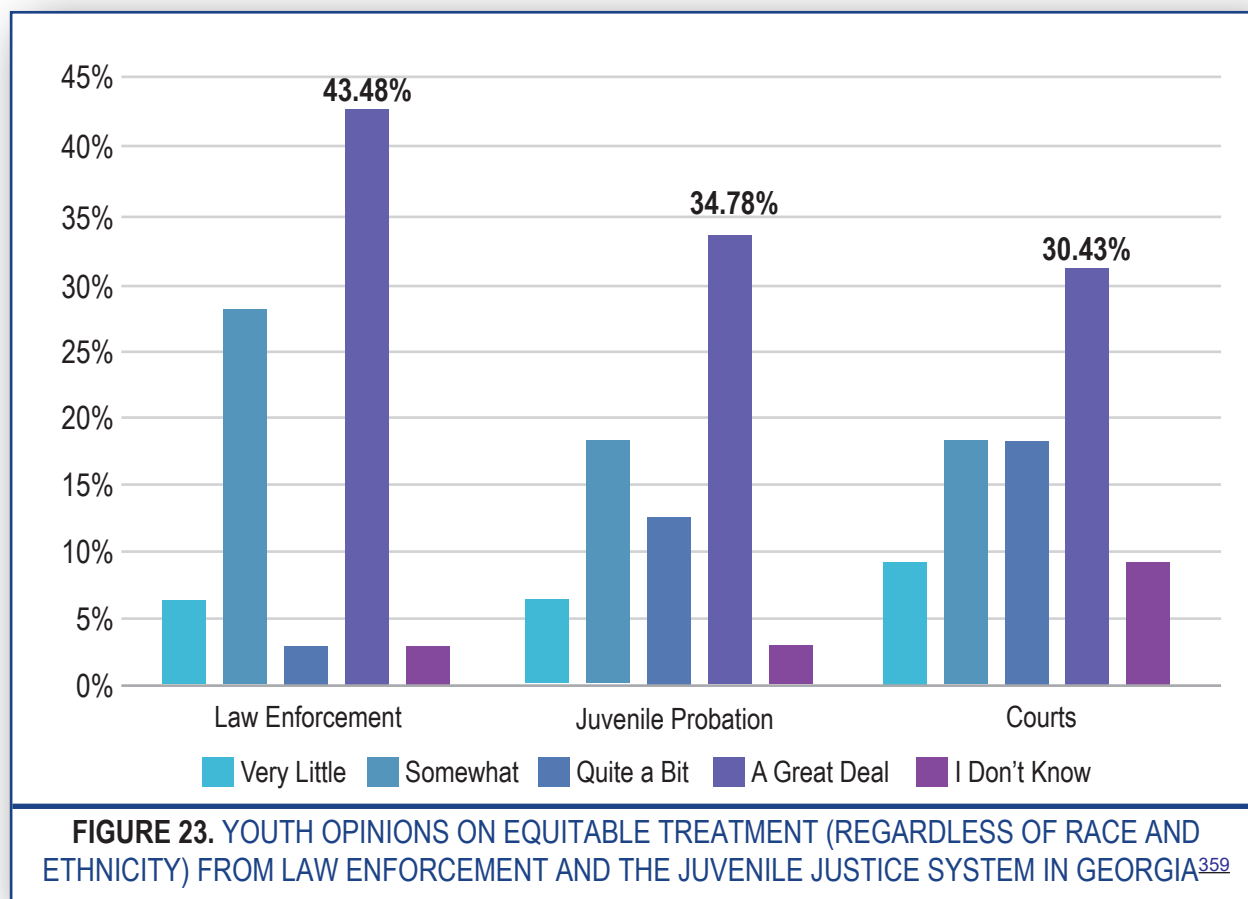


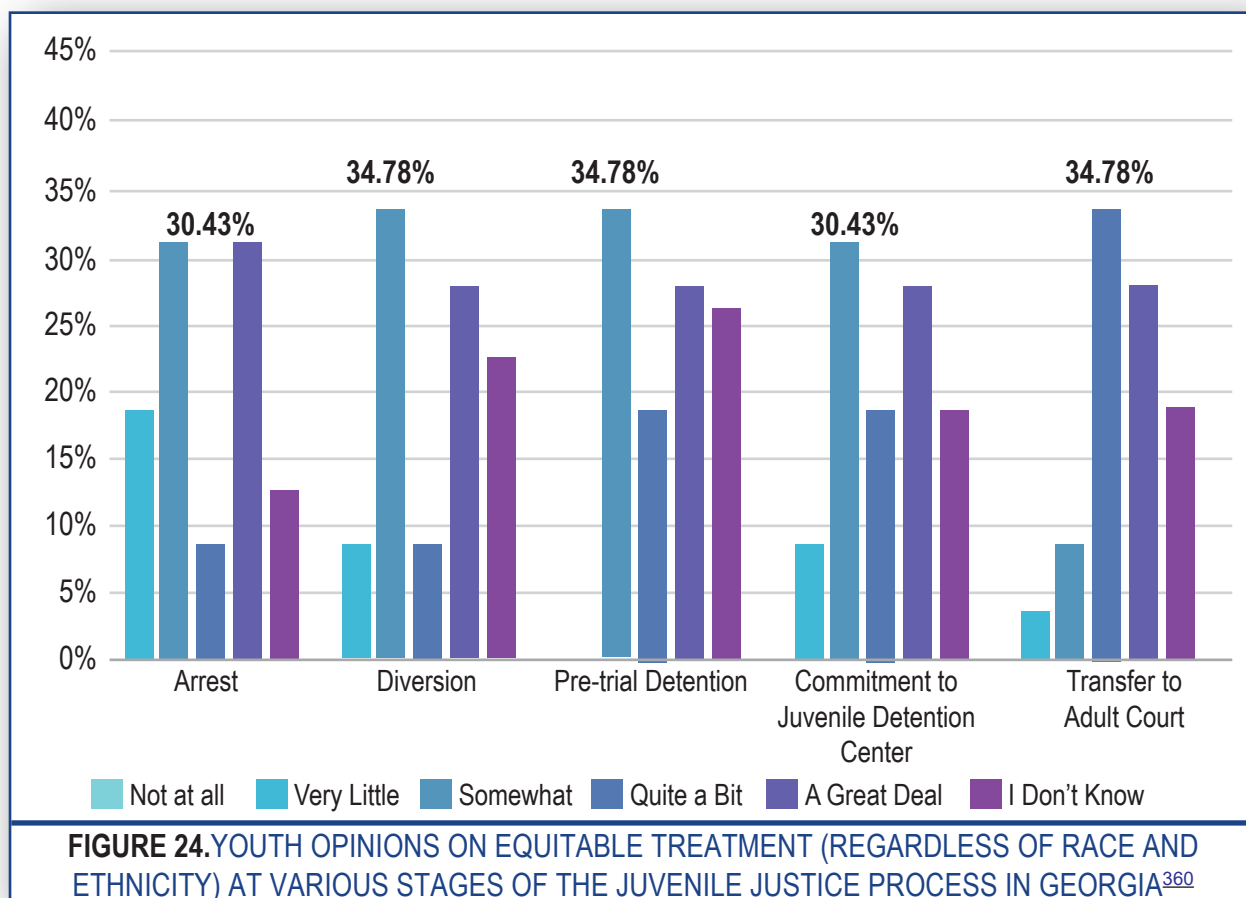
When asked about the general need for services in the community, 65% of youth responded that therapy, life skills services and peer mentoring were most needed. Regarding services needed for parents in their communities, youth most frequently cited support groups (76%), education classes (68%), peer mentoring (60%), therapy (60%), and basic needs support (60%).³⁵⁶

Youth respondents somewhat agreed that mental illness experienced by their peers impacts juvenile crime. Conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, ADHD, and other behavioral disorders were ranked as the most commonly occurring mental health illnesses experienced by peers in their communities. When asked about ways to address mental illness, youth respondents mentioned therapy, mentoring, consistent and available resources, and parent education. Further, youth indicated that tobacco/vaping, marijuana, and alcohol are the most common substances among their peers. They suggested therapy and affordable treatment as

solutions for substance use, much like they did for mental illness.³⁵⁷

Youth opinions on equitable treatment from law enforcement and the juvenile justice system were mixed. (See **Figure 23** below). Most respondents felt they received “somewhat” to “a great deal” of equitable treatment by law enforcement but were more likely to say they did not receive equitable treatment by juvenile probation and courts. When asked how to ensure equitable treatment, youth recommended raising awareness, providing more community resources, and offering more cultural and diversity training, education, and communication within the justice system and communities. With regard to changes for equitable treatment, youth suggested higher pay for juvenile justice workers, better relationships between officers and communities, less racial disparity in youth-serving systems, more community resources, and the need for youth to stay out of adult courts and jails.³⁵⁸





In terms of fair treatment at various stages of the juvenile justice system (see **Figure 24** above), the majority reported experiencing it as “somewhat” fair, with very few indicating a complete lack of fairness. In response to the question “Are you and your peers, regardless of race or ethnicity, treated equitably at different juvenile justice system contact points?”, youth mostly felt that they and their peers were “somewhat” treated equitably.³⁶¹

When asked for suggestions to improve Georgia’s juvenile justice system, youth respondents recommended:

- » Increasing pay for juvenile justice workers
- » Providing parenting classes
- » Educating youth on the law
- » Offering more community resources and programs
- » Having staff spend more time with youth rather than paperwork
- » Reevaluating CHINS, because it lacks consequences
- » Increasing resources for parents and kids who can’t afford counseling

- » Improving teamwork within agencies and collaboration with others
- » Learning about local youth organizations for referrals
- » Stopping excessive incarceration and creating better support systems
- » Enhancing cooperation with community partners

The survey shows that young people see behavioral health issues as key factors in community problems and crime, and it indicates a need for resources to reduce juvenile crime and hold parents and systems accountable for better youth outcomes. Youth respondents emphasize the necessity for more parental services, education, structured activities, and easily accessible behavioral health resources and peer mentoring. Moreover, while not highly distrustful of law enforcement and the juvenile justice system, youth suggest enhancing consistent service provision, equitable treatment, alternatives to detention, and improving staff conditions to better address youths’ needs. See [Appendix K](#) for additional information on the survey results.