Implementing a Sexual Risk Avoidance Intervention in a Juvenile Justice Setting: What We Learned, and How it Can Help Others

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ABSTRACT

Despite relatively high rates of teen pregnancy and sexual risk taking among justice-involved youth, there is a scarcity of programming to help these youth become better informed about sexual health and decision making. The lack of adequate programming may in part be due to challenges that exist when trying to develop and implement programs in juvenile justice settings. *Project With* is a sexual risk avoidance intervention that includes storytelling and mentoring components and is currently being implemented within a large juvenile justice agency in California. This paper shares the lessons learned through implementation of the *Project With* program at five juvenile justice facilities. These lessons focus on the relationships, processes, and logistics that facilitated and impeded implementation, as well as aspects of the *Project With* design that promoted youth engagement. In particular, insights about the importance of leveraging relationships, gathering buy-in at multiple levels, understanding the system, and allowing for flexibility are highlighted. A checklist is included to support other program developers and researchers who seek to create, implement, and study teen pregnancy prevention programming for justice-involved youth.

Keywords: *teen pregnancy prevention, juvenile justice, justice-involved youth, program implementation*

Justice-involved youth have limited access to relevant and engaging sexual health curricula. For example, a recent study found that 50% of incarcerated males had not received information on pregnancy or birth, and more than a third had never received information on methods of birth control or sexual transmitted infections (STIs), HIV, or AIDS. Further, in the same study 47% of surveyed youth said they were not at all confident that their partner used birth control methods the last time they had sexual intercourse (Wendt & Pederson, 2019). In another example, one longitudinal study of juvenile detainees found that, without intervention, HIV knowledge improved on average only slightly over a period of six years (El

Bcheraoui et al., 2015). Thus, justice-involved youth lack the information they need to make healthy and informed choices for their reproductive and sexual health.

Unplanned teen pregnancies have consequences that affect the individual and their children. For example, becoming a teen parent is associated with fewer years of schooling and a lower likelihood of attaining a high school diploma (Fletcher & Wolfe, 2012). Teen parents are also more likely to have a lower income and not be married or cohabitating with their partners; this includes fathers being less likely to live with their children at the time of birth (Scott et al., 2012). Moreover, a recent study found that children of incarcerated fathers were more likely to be suspended or expelled from school, even after controlling for children whose fathers were absent from the home, but not incarcerated (Wade, 2019). Further, children born to teen mothers are more likely to have future contact with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems (Hoffman, 2006).

Perhaps as the result of the lack of access to relevant and engaging sexual health curricula, justice-involved youth are at particularly high risk for becoming teen parents. For example, by age 19, more than half of justice-involved females have experienced a pregnancy; and nearly a third of justice-involved males report they have fathered a child (Oman et al., 2018). In addition to pregnancies, justice-involved youth are also more likely to initiate sexual activity at earlier ages, have more sexual partners, and use condoms less effectively than their non-justice-involved peers (Melchert & Brunett, 1990; Robillard et al., 2005; Tolou-Shams et al., 2008). In comparison to their non-justice-involved peers, where teen pregnancies continue to decline, unintended teen pregnancy has remained high among certain subgroups including justice-involved youth (Ventura et al., 2014).

Several strategies – using a variety of approaches – have been found effective for improving adolescents' knowledge of key reproductive and sexual health topics (Manlove & Moore, 2015). For example, reviews of research on pro-social relationships, youth sexual health, and pregnancy outcomes found that adolescents who experience higher levels of connectedness – for example, with a parent, another family member, or school – might receive help supporting their sexual health decision-making and make them less likely to contract an STI or become a teen parent (Markham et al., 2010; Sieving et al., 2017). In another example, the POWER Through Choices program, designed for system-involved youth (in addition to justice-involved youth, system-involved youth includes youth in the foster care system), has been effective in improving adolescents' knowledge about reproductive anatomy, STIs, and contraceptive options (Covington et al., 2016; Green et al., 2017).

While these programs and studies identify what works for non-justice-involved peers, justice-involved youth have many unique characteristics. For example, many young people in juvenile justice settings have a history of trauma that is further compounded once they enter the system. Further, justice-involved youth are more likely to have experienced neglect, unmet mental health needs, abuse and family turmoil, and have been involved in the child welfare system (Green et al., 2017). Programs targeting justice-involved youth therefore must be not only equitable, responsive, and culturally-appropriate, but also trauma-informed (Adams, 2010; Crosby, 2016).

Developing and providing sexual health education programming during a youth's stay at a juvenile justice facility is a valuable and unique opportunity. Many justice-involved youth miss out on programming that might occur in the traditional school setting because of their increased mobility between schools and justice facilities (Combs et al., 2019). While at the justice facility, providing a sexual health education program is another way to help prepare youth for

reentry into the community. In addition to sexual health knowledge, programs should also focus on addressing aspects of healthy relationships, such as intimacy, communication with partners, problem solving, and relationship building.

Thus, teen pregnancy prevention and sexual health education programs targeting justice-involved youth are warranted. However, a paucity of research-based programming specific to justice-involved youth remains. One reason for this lack of appropriate programming results from challenges in conducting research on sexual health education interventions within juvenile justice facilities and post-release communities (Freudenberg, et al. 2016; Gates et al., 2016). Many researchers cite a lack of access to juvenile justice facilities or implementation challenges as reasons why there might be a lack of research in this area (Chakraborty et al., 2019; Lane et al., 2012). To improve access to high-quality, engaging sexual health curricula, it is therefore critical that program developers and researchers learn how to gain access to, and implement research studies within juvenile justice settings.

CURRENT STUDY

To address this need, the current study presents the lessons learned from gaining access to and implementing a sexual risk avoidance intervention, *Project With*, in a large juvenile justice agency in Southern California. The implementation of *Project With* was considered successful because the study team was able to gain access to the juvenile justice facilities and complete a formative evaluation of *Project With*. The next phase of the study will include a rigorous quasi-experimental design to examine the impact of participation in *Project With* on reducing unplanned teen pregnancies among justice-involved youth. For the current study, interviews and focus groups with key *Project With* stakeholders unearthed important considerations when introducing a new program in a juvenile justice setting, as well as characteristics of the Project With program content and structure that contributed to its success. In addition, this paper includes a checklist to support teams in the early stages of implementing similar programs (Appendix).

Project With

Project With, a program developed by Urban Strategies (https://www.projectwith.net/) funded by the U.S. Department of Human Services Office of Population Affairs[i], is a 12-lesson literary-based curriculum, delivered in a six-week twice-weekly format. Each lesson includes student reading of a literary selection, and a discussion of selected literary works. Lessons include student poetry, short stories, and excerpts from films and other videos. The curriculum is intended to be delivered to groups of 8-12 youth. In ideal program delivery, as part of each lesson participants also share a meal with each other and with the facilitator throughout their six-week course. *Project With* is delivered in 12 consecutive sessions and culminates in a one-day excursion to a summer camp outside of the justice facility. *Project With* draws on stories relevant to youth and relies on facilitators with lived experience to engage and mentor incarcerated youth in conversations and learning focused on deliberate decision making. Individuals with lived experience, sometimes called peer coaches, are individuals who have had similar experiences or come from a similar background as the individual(s) they serve (Finnegan et al., 2010). Recent research has demonstrated a positive relationship between models that draw on the expertise and experiences of facilitators or coaches with lived experiences and outcomes for formerly incarcerated individuals (Bahr et al., 2010; Connolly & Granfield, 2017; Heidemann et al., 2014; Lebel, 2007; Tolan et al., 2014). Although a primary goal of the program is to prevent unwanted pregnancies, *Project With* uses a holistic approach to help youth reflect on and have dialogue around issues that may influence sexual decision making such as friendships, family, grief,

early romantic relationships, and enduring commitments such as marriage. Currently, *Project With* is being implemented as part of a multi-year research study examining the impact of the intervention on reducing risky sexual attitudes and behaviors. For the past two years, the *Project With* team has worked with a large juvenile justice agency to implement the program and research study.

METHOD

The current study relies on interviews and focus groups with the *Project With* lead developer, *Project With* facilitators, and a probation officer who assists with *Project With* implementation.

Sample Characteristics

Stakeholders. The study sample comprised stakeholders who worked on different aspects of *Project With* implementation including a probation officer, the *Project With* lead developer, and *Project With* facilitators. Informed consent was gathered from each interview and focus group participant prior to data collection; participants were additionally asked consent to use their quotes for reporting.

The probation officer was interviewed individually and had worked with the *Project With* program since implementation of the program, approximately one year. The *Project With* lead developer was also interviewed individually and had been in his position since program conception, approximately two years (at the time of the interview). One facilitator was also interviewed individually. The evaluation team conducted a focus group with three *Project With* facilitators.[ii] At the time of the focus group and interview, the facilitators' tenure at their current positions ranged from six months to one year. When he was a youth, Facilitator 1 lived in the same facility as the youth he serves through *Project With*. He currently facilitates anger management and gang intervention services and does advocacy work. Facilitator 2 was a facilitator for a community center in the community

for many years prior to his work with *Project With* and is embedded within the community. Facilitator 3 also serves as a facilitator for other programs related to *Project With*, including parenting, anger management, and relationships. Finally, Facilitator 4 was recruited by a friend because of his experience facilitating groups with high-risk populations, including gang intervention.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The evaluation team conducted the interviews and focus groups. The evaluation team took the lead in developing the interview and focus group protocols. Protocols were grounded in learning more about the process of introducing *Project With* into the juvenile justice agency, learning about the role of the facilitator, the types of implementation challenges experienced with *Project With*, and the strategies used to address those challenges. After the protocols were developed, the lead program developer provided feedback on the protocols.

For each interview or focus group, one person led the interview or focus group and a second person took notes. Following the interview or focus group, one team member cleaned the notes and provided to the interviewer or focus group lead for review and edits. After notes were finalized, one coder reviewed all data and developed a code book of themes, then reviewed the data to identify exemplar quotes and discussion. The themes and exemplars are fully described in the following section.

RESULTS

Interview participants highlight how *Project With* was introduced into a large juvenile justice system, including which aspects of the introduction process contributed to success entering the system and what would have been helpful to know before initiating the process. Beyond unpacking the process for entering

this system, interview and focus group discussion from a probation officer, *Project With* facilitators, and the *Project With* lead shed light onto why implementation success varied among facilities, despite all facilities being housed within the same juvenile justice system, as well as what aspects of the *Project With* program contributed to it being well-received within the facilities where implementation was possible. The results are described in two main sections: (1) Introducing Programming Into a Juvenile Justice System, which focuses on the lessons learned for navigating this process; and (2) Programmatic Contributors to *Project With* Success, which focuses on the key elements of *Project With* that made it well-received within the juvenile justice system. The key learnings regarding designing and introducing a program into a juvenile justice system are useful to those attempting to create and implement successful programs serving justice-involved youth.

Introducing Programming into a Juvenile Justice System

The process of introducing the *Project With* program, getting buy-in from key stakeholders, pushing through required approval processes, and achieving implementation in individual facilities took time and effort. At the time of the interviews and focus groups, implementation across this juvenile justice system was not yet complete, as implementation was conducted in cohorts. However, insights and lessons learned thus far may help others as they attempt to navigate this complex process. In particular, key learnings center around three major themes: (1) the value of leveraging relationships when possible; (2) why gathering buy-in at multiple levels is crucial; and (3) the importance of understanding the intended system for program delivery and flexibility across facilities within the system.

Leveraging Relationships with Advocates in the Juvenile Justice System

Project With began through a teen pregnancy prevention grant opportunity. The *Project With* lead developer and partner organizations came together to write a proposal to develop an innovative program to reduce teen pregnancy with a focus on justice-involved youth. Although they had a clear idea of how they would develop the program, they needed an appropriate setting to implement the program and evaluate its effect. One of the eventual *Project With* facilitators knew the *Project With* developer and had a distant connection to an individual with decision-making power at a large juvenile justice agency in the area. Although this was not a close connection, it was enough to help the *Project With* team get a meeting to pitch the idea and see if the agency was interested in participating and willing to sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for the grant proposal. The in-person meeting went well, and the juvenile justice agency staff member was excited about the opportunity. However, getting an MOU in a short time frame was not possible and the only thing the agency could offer was a letter of support that described their interest in the program but did not promise their participation if awarded the grant. In sum, this first point of contact between *Project With* and the juvenile justice agency was coordinated based on a peripheral connection that allowed the program team to get their foot in the door.

After the grant was awarded, the *Project With* team reached back out to start the process of formally establishing an MOU to get the program started. Although the same juvenile justice agency staff member was able to assist them in starting this process, soon after this process started, that individual retired leaving an interim staff member in their place. *Project With* did not have any personal connection with this individual and despite attempts to keep the MOU process moving, little progress was made while the interim staffer was in place. Several months later, the position was filled permanently with an individual

that the *Project With* lead developer happened to know from previous work. The lead developer set up a meeting with the new agency staff member to introduce the project. Although new to the position and still getting situated in their role, having had experience with the lead developer allowed for immediate rapport and trust. Through conversation with this individual, *Project With* was able to get renewed support for the program and insight into how to move the project forward while they waited for the executed MOU. The staff member has since served as an important high-level advocate for the work and resource when implementation challenges arise. Subsequently, the probation officer assigned to oversee *Project With* activities at one of the juvenile justice facilities happened to know the *Project With* lead developer from previous work in the nonprofit sector. This probation officer trusted the *Project With* team and saw the value in the program immediately. This individual has been a key advocate for the program within their facility and in the next phase of the work will be a liaison to assist other facilities as they attempt to implement *Project With*.

Further, the *Project With* lead developer underscored the importance of face-to-face communication and relationship building when leveraging these connections. According to the lead developer, taking the time to travel to meetings, even if they are short, demonstrates a respect for the individual's time and the program's commitment to building a lasting and successful relationship. Whenever possible, the lead developer also provided food for the meetings. The lead developer has found that sharing a meal or a snack together provides another opportunity to build relationships.

When thinking about forming a project team, and deciding who is on that team, developers should consider the importance of having established relationships with relevant juvenile justice system stakeholders and plan their team accordingly. The importance of having a history with justice-involved populations

and acting as a resource to these populations cannot be stressed enough. These relationships are foundationally built on trust, the development of which is facilitated by a history of relationship building. Additionally, it should be noted that staff turnover at any level can result in additional implementation delays as the project team works to regain interest from new staff.

Gathering Buy-In at Multiple Levels

The importance of obtaining program buy-in from stakeholders in various roles is perhaps the most important lesson learned during the initial implementation of *Project With*. High-level buy-in was crucial for ensuring the program and corresponding evaluation were allowed in the facilities, and was also a useful lever for introducing *Project With* to facility directors. The *Project With* lead developer was invited to attend a facility director meeting to introduce the program and gauge their interest in introducing the program in each facility. This meeting went well with all directors indicating they were willing to support the program within their facilities. Having this buy-in from directors was imperative as it provided crucial access to the specific facilities.

However, despite interest in the program from directors of all five facilities, the extent to which successful implementation occurred varied based largely on the engagement of probation officers tasked with coordinating the logistics for *Project With*: identifying youth to participate, designating a space for the program sessions, and assigning staff to coordinate and sit in on the sessions with youth (including the excursion). At one end of the spectrum, the probation officer who already knew the *Project With* lead developer has been a key driver of *Project With*'s success at that facility; the probation officer has thoughtfully curated appropriate groups of youth, considered the concerns of other probation officers (e.g., worries that the program would only target well-behaved youth leaving the problematic youth

with the other probation officers), and worked to engage other probation officers to see the value of the program.

In contrast, buy-in from probation officers, and subsequent implementation, has not been as successful at the remaining facilities due to a multitude of reasons. For example, initially one facility had a very invested probation officer assigned to work with *Project With* and implementation proceeded as planned. But after the probation officer had to change their shift schedule, another invested probation officer was not identified, and, as a result, implementation stalled. Another facility uses a rotational approach for probation officers where whomever is on duty that day is responsible for *Project With* rather than having a dedicated staff member, making it difficult to get sustained engagement from the probation officers working with the program. The probation officers at another facility do not appear to take the program seriously and do not convey the seriousness of the program to youth, despite instructions to do so from their facility director. For example, probation officers at this facility did not select youth to participate and instead told them it is an optional program to talk to the "pregnancy people". Additionally, the probation officers did not identify a quiet space for the program and instead have it in the general living room area where other activities and television are accessible. Not surprisingly, participation was low at this facility and *Project With* decided to pause their work with that facility until the circumstances are more conducive for success.

The *Project With* lead developer, the probation officer, and the facilitators made it abundantly clear that buy-in from probation officers is essential as they are the gatekeepers to the youth. These gatekeepers need to be aware of the program and see the value of it for participating youth. Interview and focus group participants' resounding recommendation to help make this happen was to let probation officers see the program in action. The lead developer and probation officer both explained that when they can

get probation officers to see the program, the probation officers start to understand how it engages youth and what the youth get from the program. As others consider how to introduce programs into juvenile justice facilities, it is imperative that they think through the layers of gatekeepers to reach youth and engage each of those gatekeepers. A program can have all the necessary stamps of approval but without support on the ground its ability to make meaningful impacts is limited. These key takeaways and lessons learned about the process of introducing *Project With* into this setting are valuable as others think through how to navigate this process. However, successful programing can't happen unless the program is one that youth and staff find valuable.

Understanding the System and Flexibility Across Facilities within the System

In addition to leveraging relationships, having a good understanding of the intended system for program implementation is vital. First, others planning to implement programming in juvenile justice systems should be sure to develop a clear understanding of whether an MOU is necessary for implementation to begin. If an MOU is needed, they should ask questions to understand what can be done while the MOU is being processed to make good use of the waiting period. After waiting numerous months to have the MOU approved, the *Project With* team learned that the only reason they needed the MOU was because they planned to conduct evaluation activities. If they only planned to implement programming, an MOU was not necessary and instead their team would just have to pass background checks to enter the facilities. Although *Project With* needed to have an evaluation component as part of their grant requirements, this piece of information would have been helpful to know earlier in the process as *Project With* could have entered the facilities right away to begin piloting the program and working out kinks in implementation. For example, this time could be used to test out different lessons, work out potential issues with

technology, explore variation in group size, or determine the best settings for implementation.

Second, other programs aiming to enter the juvenile justice space under an MOU should inquire about the MOU timeline and process to create a realistic plan for implementation. The MOU process can be a lengthy one with many steps. In the case of *Project With*, the process took approximately one year, and this was perceived to be a typical timeline for this large juvenile justice system. Having a better understanding of how long the process takes would have been helpful for the *Project With* team as they were geared up for implementation much earlier but could not start without approval. Additionally, having clarity on how to ensure the process is progressing would have been valuable, especially during the times where a known liaison within the agency was not available.

Third, others delivering programming in juvenile justice facilities should assess the context and nuances of each facility as they design plans for implementation to ensure the program remains appropriate and feasible despite differences across settings. As implementation began, *Project With* quickly learned that despite all the facilities being run by the same juvenile justice agency, how each facility functions varies tremendously. Facilities each have their own director with distinct approaches to leadership and the culture of each facility is unique. The facilities are dispersed across a large county and their location impacts how many other organizations are providing services. For instance, one facility manages requests to provide services from upwards of 40 different organizations because it is located closer to a city center. Conversely, a facility located on the outskirts of the county only gets requests from two organizations to provide services on a regular basis. Thus, the capacity of facilities to take on additional programming and coordinate that programming varies. Facilities also have different rules and processes to enforce

rules, as well as different structures and physical settings. For example, some facilities use a cottage structure where youth are organized into cottage housing and programming occurs in the housing space whereas other facilities use classroom settings for programming. The setting played a prominent role in the success of *Project With* implementation as there were many distractions for youth in the cottage setting that were not present in the classroom setting.

Additionally, despite support from high-level leadership from the juvenile justice agency and individual facility directors, the extent to which this support resulted in engagement from staff and youth varied. For example, although there might be buy-in from a probation officer at a specific facility, whether or not youth engaged in the program was more related to programmatic contributors to *Project With*, as discussed in more detail in the following section. As they have attempted implementation across five facilities, *Project With* has learned that each facility has its own unique environment and there must be flexibility in how the program is implemented to account for this variance.

Tying together the themes of gaining buy-in at multiple levels and understanding the system, it is important to note that staff turnover at different levels resulting in system-wide changes can occur. There may be differences between jurisdictions— what worked in one jurisdiction might not work in another. For example, in addition to establishing the MOU, it will most likely be necessary to receive approval from an independent Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB will ensure the research design is ethically appropriate. Although an IRB can grant approval, the review of the approval and IRB application may need to go through additional reviews by various stakeholders before the project can be implemented. In juvenile justice settings, additional approvals beyond the MOU and IRB may be necessary from stakeholders such as the Superior Court, Public Defender's Office, individual attorneys

representing youth, or other entities within each facility. The insights gained from working with one juvenile justice agency, might not apply to other agencies; thus, being nimble in program implementation is key. To potentially streamline the approval process, it is necessary to have buy-in at multiple levels, and to have a solid understanding of the system.

Further, in some jurisdictions, it might be beneficial to work within other linked systems to access justice-involved youth. For example, working with the county or state education agency responsible for providing education to youth could be one alternative pathway to reaching youth.

Programmatic Contributors to *Project With* Success

Within the facilities where *Project With* was well-implemented, stakeholders emphasized the value of the program. Although all stakeholders viewed the program favorably, the probation officer provided an important perspective as he was not part of the *Project With* program. The probation officer voiced positive perceptions of *Project With* as a whole and noted that the youth are engaged in the lessons and willing to open up during sessions. Additionally, the probation officer emphasized that the facilitators do a good job relating to the youth and engaging with them in nonjudgmental ways. The only critique raised by the probation officer highlighted that although most youth participants are Latino or Black, the facilitators do not always represent both racial and ethnic backgrounds.

In addition to the strengths highlighted by the probation officer, stakeholders as a whole described numerous aspects of the development and structure of *Project With* that contribute to it being a well-received program. In reflecting on why the program resonates with youth, stakeholders stressed the importance of: (1) having a curriculum that is relevant and engaging for the target population; (2) facilitators who are relatable and invested; (3) flexibility in curriculum delivery; (4) informal opportunities for connection and other ways to incentivize participation.

Relevant and Engaging Curriculum Tailored to the Target Population

To develop the *Project With* curriculum, the development team started with The Art of Loving Well, an established pregnancy prevention curriculum. The Art of Loving Well had been studied previously (The Art of Loving Well The Report Card, n.d.) and demonstrated a positive impact on understanding the consequences of teen sexual activity, plans to pressure others to have sex, and intention to delay sex among participating youth. *Project With* aimed to customize this curriculum for use with justice-involved youth within juvenile justice settings. To accomplish this, the *Project With* lead developer and facilitators reviewed the 40 stories included in The Art of Loving Well to narrow the collection down by considering the opinions and experiences of facilitators with lived experience of trauma and the justice system, the length and reading level of stories, and their ability to engage youth. Additional, original stories shared by facilitators during the *Project With* development process were added. This process helped to ensure the curriculum is relevant and facilitators are invested in the content they deliver. These activities resulted in the current set of 13 stories delivered over 12 lessons (one lesson is distinct for male and female youth). Additionally, videos and activities were infused into the lessons to help reinforce themes from the lessons and encourage greater youth engagement.

Relatable and Invested Facilitators

Project With facilitators all bring lived experience to their work, having been involved in the juvenile justice system or having dealt with significant traumas and challenges (e.g., teen pregnancy). Some of the facilitators have spent time living in the very same residential juvenile justice facilities where they are currently implementing *Project With*. Facilitators

shared that having lived experience or, at the very least, an understanding of the culture of gang and community violence that youth live through, is vital to succeeding in the facilitator role. Facilitators' own experiences and backgrounds allow them to have a real understanding of what the youth are experiencing and what they need to know and do to make positive changes in their lives. When asked what training and experience is most important for facilitators to bring, facilitators stressed that they must bring empathy, positivity, patience, humbleness, and realness. From their viewpoint it is imperative that youth know the facilitators were once in their shoes. Additionally, facilitators said the role is different from public speaking, and to be successful one must be skilled in helping youth use their voices. In other words, it is not just facilitators lecturing to youth; it is working with youth to help youth understand the key curriculum concepts and putting them into their own voice. When youth were more able to directly tie the curriculum to their lives, they had more buy-in for the program.

Flexibility in Curriculum Delivery

According to the probation officer, *Project With* lead developer, and *Project With* facilitators, implementing a program in a closed custody juvenile justice setting requires flexibility. The group dynamics and ability to deliver curriculum are often impacted by other events occurring at the facility. A rigid program that requires exact replication of lessons may not meet youth where they are and may not be feasible as facility context changes. For example, events like riots and interpersonal disputes can change what programming is possible and what parts of it might be most useful for moving youth in a positive direction. Facilitators noted that sometimes it can take quite a while to get all youth in the meeting space and sometimes youth come and go during the session based on other obligations. Being flexible and able to make changes on the go is crucial. To account for the

contextual fluidity within these facilities, *Project With* sessions begin with a check-in to get the pulse of the group. Facilitators use this information to decide whether the lesson can proceed as planned or if adjustments need to be made. Facilitators reported that lesson delivery is different every time it is implemented, and it is vital to learn as you go and make refinements. For example, when one facility asked to increase the size of the *Project With* cohort, facilitators initially delivered the lessons in one large group. After testing this out and reflecting on how it went, they decided to break the youth up into two small groups and deliver lessons to each sub-group separately, which was more successful because it allowed more space for each youth voice and a more manageable group size.

Informal Opportunities for Connection and Other Ways to Incentivize Participation

One important aspect of the *Project With* curriculum is a shared meal where youth, facilitators, and probation officers eat together. The purpose of the shared meal is to create a relaxed atmosphere to build relationships. The *Project With* lead developer stressed that some of the youth had never experienced family meals and having a time to connect and build a family dynamic is powerful. This space allows facilitators to share details about their stories and for the youth and facilitators to really get to know one another. To create a sense of normalcy and to incentivize youth to continue coming back to the program, *Project With* brings in food from outside the facility. To practice discipline and respect at mealtime, everyone waits to eat until everyone has food and has sat down at the table. The probation officer emphasized the importance of this time for youth.

Opportunities like this not only build relationships between facilitators and youth but also help foster positive connections between youth, some of whom are members of opposing gangs. Being in the same

space and having informal opportunities to get to know one another appeared to create a sense of community among youth.

Mealtime with food from outside the facilities was one of several ways *Project With* incentivized participation in the program. An additional incentive for program participation and completion was a day long end of program trip to a local summer camp facility. This excursion includes a lesson, snack and mealtime, outdoor activities (e.g., sledding, hiking), and team-building activities (e.g., obstacle course, games). The probation officer highlighted the value of this excursion, indicating it gives youth something to look forward to, exposes them to experiences they may have never had (e.g., hiking, seeing snow), and allows them to have some time to "just be a kid". To attend this excursion, youth must complete the program and be in good standing with their facility (i.e., no write ups, not be labeled as "high risk"). Facilitators and the lead developer stressed that youth see the excursion as an incentive, and it helps motivate them to behave outside of their time in the program. The use of incentives to motivate youth to continue engaging in the program and uphold values from the program in their day-to-day life was one useful strategy to ensure *Project With* success.

DISCUSSION

The current study of *Project With* identified important considerations for others attempting to develop and implement programs with justice-involved youth. Building on the successes and challenges experienced by these stakeholders, a probation officer, program facilitators, and the program developer, we created a checklist for those attempting to engage with a juvenile justice system. The purpose of the checklist is to assist others in developing and implementing projects aimed at increasing access to sexual health programming for justice-involved youth—particularly those youth who are incarcerated. The checklist was built on the key learnings centered on

four major themes: (1) the value of leveraging relationships when possible; (2) the importance of understanding the intended system for program delivery; (3) why gathering buy-in at multiple levels is crucial; and (4) the need for flexibility across facilities within the system.

Leveraging relationships is indeed critical to the success of any project. For *Project With*, it took multiple attempts from the program developer and the facilitators to identify potential gatekeepers. Gatekeepers often included individuals at multiple levels; these individuals included Agency, Department, and Facility Directors, and staff within facilities. Once gatekeepers were identified, the program developer set up in-person meetings with these individuals. Setting up a meeting in-person, compared to a phone call, highlighted the investment in time and travel the developer was willing to make to meet with a stakeholder; this went a long way to demonstrate his commitment. The program developer also relied on his professional network to access stakeholders; this included former colleagues, individuals he had met from working in the community, and asking his own direct contacts to utilize their networks.

Once discussions started with the juvenile justice agency, the developer focused on working with various stakeholders to identify the system for delivery. For *Project With*, understanding the specific juvenile justice system was one area where there were many challenges. Reflecting on the process, the program developer was able to identify some key factors that would have mitigated challenges. For example, understanding the purpose and process for establishing the MOU, including a waiting period and what elements required an MOU would have enabled program implementation to start earlier. The program developer and facilitators also learned how each facility had unique attributes—even within the same county agency. Thus, prior to implementation, it was important to know the gatekeepers at each facility, to understand how each facility operated, and to under-

stand concerns from staff at each facility. It was important not to generalize concerns across facilities, or to assume that because one facility did not have or voice concerns that other facilities did not have concerns as well. Throughout implementation, the facilitators also learned that there are key physical space features that make a room ideal for program delivery; for *Project With*, those attributes included a place that is quiet, secure, and easily accessible by youth.

Prior to and throughout implementation, it was imperative to gather buy-in at multiple levels to gain access to the juvenile justice system and to implement the program successfully. The program developer relied on personal introductions whenever possible, took all opportunities to present *Project With* to stakeholders and gatekeepers and met individually with key stakeholders. *Project With* experienced some initial delays when there was turnover among those who had buy-in. Thus, it is important to have buy-in across levels, buildings, and stakeholders. The program developer and facilitators recognized that it was easiest to obtain buy-in when stakeholders were able to see *Project With* in action—thus, opportunities to demonstrate the program should be identified and prioritized. Finally, the most important stakeholders to have buy-in from are the youth themselves. To gain buy-in from youth, *Project With* used a variety of incentives to encourage participation, and also engaged facilitators with lived experience who are relatable and invested in the youth, and are empathic, positive, patient, and humble.

The final theme that emerged from the interviews and focus groups and is included in the checklist is flexibility across facilities. Even within the same county agency, the different facilities had their own protocols, schedules, and engagement styles. Learning and understanding these nuances, and adapting programming was critical to success. Once facilita-

tors are identified, they should be well-trained to implement the program so that they can be nimble when necessary to address quickly changing needs and priorities within the justice facility.

CONCLUSIONS

Justice-involved youth remain at higher risk for unplanned teen pregnancies and fatherhood, and other riskier sexual health behaviors. Despite the increased risk, research-based teen-pregnancy and health relationships programming specifically designed for these youth is lacking. Because many developers cite logistical and accessibility issues in reaching justice-involved youth and working with juvenile justice agencies, the purpose of this paper was to capitalize on the challenges and successes experienced by a program, *Project With*, which was mostly effective at integrating into a large juvenile justice agency, and reaching justice-involved youth to provide a comprehensive risk-reduction program. The challenges and successes experienced by the *Project With* team are highlighted here and were used to develop a checklist that will assist others to develop and test similar programs targeting this population, with the eventual intent of increasing knowledge and decreasing risky behaviors among these youth.

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Appendix
Checklist for Implementing a Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program in Juvenile Justice Settings

Leveraging Relationships
- o (If time permits) develop network in your target area by volunteering, attending community meetings, etc.
- o Reach out to existing network to identify potential gatekeepers
- o Identify gatekeepers
- o Schedule face-to-face meetings to establish relationships
- o Maintain consistent engagement with stakeholders, including youth

Understanding Intended System for Delivery
- o Understand MOU process
  - o Purpose of MOU
  - o What activities need approval, and what do not
  - o Typical waiting period
- o Assess each program delivery site for
  - o Who are the relevant gatekeepers
  - o What are the unique attributes of the facilities
  - o What are the concerns from staff at the facilities
  - o Schedule for youth within the facility
  - o Location for program delivery
    - ▪ Should be quiet, secure, easily accessible by youth

Gathering Buy-In at Multiple Levels
- o Use existing contacts
- o Make personal introductions when possible
- o Present at facility director meetings
- o Meet with individual probation officers
- o Identify at least one, consistent, engaged staff member at each facility
- o Whenever possible, present the program to stakeholders—let them see program in action
- o Ensure staff have clear understanding of program and how to describe to youth
- o Create a script for staff to use to tell youth about program and to recruit youth to participate
- o Provide youth with incentives when they participate. Examples of incentives include:
  - o Food
  - o Excursions or events
  - o Opportunities to build relationships with peers and facilitators
  - o Aftercare upon release from facility
- o Engage facilitators who have the following characteristics:
  - o Have lived experience e.g., they share common experiences or backgrounds to the youth they serve
  - o Are relatable and invested
  - o Are empathic, positive, patient, and humble
- o Integrate youth input as you develop the program

Enabling Flexibility Across Facilities
- o Have flexibility in implementation
- o Train facilitators
- o Engage facilitators who are nimble to address in-the-moment changes in program delivery

[ii] Note that one facilitator was interviewed separately from the focus group because of availability.