



# NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US

## AMPLIFYING THE PERSPECTIVES OF YOUTH WITH EXPERIENCES OF PARENTAL INCARCERATION THROUGH YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

**Background:** Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is an empowerment approach in which a team of three young adult researchers with experiences of family member incarceration partnered with University of Florida researchers and two local community-based organizations (Project YouthBuild, or PYB; River Phoenix Center for Peacebuilding, or RPCP). The young adult researchers participated in all phases of research, taking a leadership role in choosing the topic, population of focus, and research methods. The young adult researchers chose to ask the research question, **What are the strengths and support needs of youth with incarcerated parents?** They collected 24 qualitative questionnaires and completed one focus group with Florida youth who have experienced parental incarceration.

**PYB** is an educational, occupational, and leadership program for young people ages 16–24 from low-income backgrounds who have dropped out of school.

**RPCP** is a community-based organization that promotes best practices in peacebuilding through dialogues and workshops on conflict resolution and social-emotional learning.

**Study design:** The young adult researchers chose to start at age 12 because youth would, in their words, “know what’s going on.” They chose to stop at 19, sharing that youth are “grown” and less likely to be impacted by support at 19. They chose to focus on all races because they did not

want to perpetuate stereotypes, especially for Black families. In their words, "everyone can experience incarceration." The young adult researchers chose focus groups and qualitative questionnaires as their research methods. They selected focus groups because they felt that youth would be willing to share with more people present versus being "on the spot" in a one-on-one interview. They chose questionnaires so that youth could share privately anything they did not feel comfortable sharing out loud.

**Youth–adult partnership:** The adult partners learned from the young adult researchers that it is critical to conduct YPAR programming in partnership with a trusted organization, especially when working with this population. In this specific case, the young adult researchers graduated from PYB, and RPCP conducted training within their educational programming. The young adult researchers shared that they would not have joined the team if it was only University of Florida researchers. When reflecting on the partnership at the end of the project, the young adults said, "I liked that you always gave us a choice and let us make decisions."

**Research conference:** At a national research conference, the young adult researchers presented their project to an audience of 75–100 academics, practitioners, and activists. They described the experience as empowering and described it as the highlight of the project, saying, for example, "it made me feel important, like my opinion mattered," and "it made me feel more confident and like a

leader." The conference also involved out-of-state travel, which one young adult described as a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

**Discussion:** The results highlight a discrepancy between the support youth want and the support typically provided by systems and recommended for families in the broader research literature. Currently, support mainly focuses on the parent during re-entry, or assumed needs for children in relation to the parent who was incarcerated. During parental incarceration, supports focus on visitation, parenting strategies, and ways to increase family bonds. Youth also sometimes receive formal services. Overall, this study's young adult researchers and youth participants reported the need for more informal and private support, including support groups and settings where they can be around others who have shared lived experiences.

**Stigma and recruitment challenges:** Despite recruiting within a trusted organization, and a study designed by young adults with lived experiences focused on strengths and supports, recruitment was immensely challenging. This challenge, and the questionnaire responses, highlighted continued stigma around having an incarcerated parent. The young adult researchers shared that their families told them not to talk about it, so they were not surprised by these challenges. It is therefore important to address the stigma around experiencing incarceration.



## KEY FINDINGS:

Several **key themes** related to better supporting youth with incarcerated parents emerged from both participant responses and the young adult researchers' own experiences.

- 1. Reducing economic burden for non-incarcerated family members:** Specifically, reduce the cost of, or make free, opportunities to communicate with incarcerated family members (e.g., phone calls, video chats). Youth also shared that allowing incarcerated parents to work for a decent wage is one of the most important ways to reduce economic burden. Youth described how not being able to work for pay (which is the case in Florida) leads parents to fall behind on child support, impacting economic opportunities for the broader family system.
- 2. Developmentally appropriate ways to discuss incarceration, so that youth can process their feelings about it when it happens:** Specifically, support parents in talking to their children about incarceration soon after it occurs and provide support for youth if they want to have boundaries with the incarcerated parent (e.g., not wanting to hug).
- 3. The need for informal, non-traditional support:** Youth shared that they did not feel comfortable attending formal mental health services but wanted someone to talk to outside of their family. They recommended providing youth-led emotional support in a non-stigmatized place, and mentoring programs specifically for youth who have had incarcerated parents, so that youth understand that the incarceration is not their fault and that it becomes normalized because so many families experience incarceration.
- 4. Importance of privacy:** Specifically, they shared that they did not like programs that singled them out as a child needing help, like school backpack programs. They recommended private support and a routinized way to inform schools/teachers, so they know the bigger picture if problems occur.

