



# RAISING VOICES

## YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH TO EXPLORE EXPERIENCES AND STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING THE WELL-BEING OF YOUTH WITH INCARCERATED PARENTS

**Background:** This study, initiated by researchers at Case Western Reserve University, utilized a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approach in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, to explore the impact of having an incarcerated parent on youth well-being. The project engaged a youth advisory board to help select and design the research methodology. The YPAR approach included focus group discussion, storytelling, and photovoice with 20 participants, ages 10–18.

**Aims:** The aims of the study were (1) to explore the impact of having an incarcerated parent on youth (ages 10–18) well-being; (2) to gather input from youth on what strategies could help address the challenges of having an incarcerated parent and to promote individual and community flourishing.

**Findings and youth recommendations on research topic:** Study findings highlight the impact that incarceration has beyond the convicted individual; it affects children, families, and entire communities. Youth discussed the root causes of community violence and mass incarceration, and the ways in which our current system perpetuates, rather than improves, these challenges. The youth discussed interconnected challenges in maintaining mental health, such as how incarceration can worsen the mental health of incarcerated individuals and those close to them. The youth developed strategies for policy, social services, schools, parents, children, and communities to better address their needs in relation to having an incarcerated parent and to promote flourishing.

## STRATEGIES:

- Addressing the root causes of poverty and racism in their communities (e.g., building wealth for Black and minority families and creating more accountability and better relationships with law enforcement)
- Finding ways to connect children and youth with others who have had a similar experience of having incarcerated family members in order to normalize the children's experiences and so that students know that they are not alone
- Increasing mental health services for incarcerated individuals and their families
- Providing universal supports such as free school lunch and afterschool programming
- Talking openly and honestly with children about incarceration, letting children guide whether and how to maintain relationships with incarcerated parents, and listening to children

**YPAR method conclusions:** For this YPAR project, youth were involved in all stages of the research, including planning, data collection, analysis, and dissemination. A core advisory board of young people, adults, and community partners was created to enhance the research and improve linkages between community organizations, policy makers, and youth. Flexibility was a key component in the YPAR process, particularly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which required switching from remote data collection to in-person and back again to

remote. The Case Western Reserve University researchers saw their role as being facilitators and promoters of young people's interests, providing space for young people to talk and share their concerns, even if not related to the research topic. This was very important during the pandemic, when youth expressed multiple anxieties in addition to having an incarcerated parent. The university also integrated a form of peer support into the YPAR approach to address issues of trauma, stigma, and shame.



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