

Youth for Youth: Raising the voices of children of incarcerated parents and implications for policy and practice

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Abstract

The aims of our study were (1) to explore the impact of having an incarcerated parent on youth (ages 10–18) wellbeing; and (2) to identify recommendations from the youth based on their needs which address the challenges of having an incarcerated parent and promote individual and community flourishing. We utilized a Youth Participatory Action Research approach, including semistructured interviews, focus group discussions, storytelling, and photovoice with 20 participants, ages 10–18. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis and organized into five thematic categories: (1) youths' perceptions of their communities; (2) incarcerations' impact on families and communities; (3) incarcerations' influence on mental health and flourishing; (4) incarceration as a solution for community safety; and (5) addressing the impact of incarceration on children, families, and communities. Findings provide important implications for practice and policy with children of incarcerated parents and for promoting flourishing individuals and communities.

KEYWORDS

adolescent, child, children of incarcerated parents, flourishing, participatory methods, policy

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Across the United States, there is a burgeoning number of young people who have or have had an incarcerated parent. Nationally, as many as 1 in 28 children have an incarcerated parent (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010). According to a report by the Prison Policy (2021), the incarceration rate in Ohio was 659 per 100,000 people (including prisons, jails, immigration detention, and juvenile justice facilities). While incarceration has an especially profound impact on families from a low socioeconomic background, racial disparities in incarceration intensify its impact on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color families. For example, the National Survey of Children's Health found 26% of American Indian children, 17% of Black/African American children, and 7% of Hispanic/Latino children have had a parent who was ever incarcerated, compared to 6% of non-Hispanic White children (Data Resource Center for Child & Adolescent Health, 2018). Morsy and Rothstein (2016) reported that an estimated 25% of African American children have experienced a parent being imprisoned for some period of time by the age of 14 years.

The Adverse Childhood Events Questionnaire identifies parental incarceration as an example of a trauma (Giano et al., 2020). Children of parents who have been incarcerated are more likely to live in a neighborhood that is less supportive, less safe, and more impoverished and are prone to experience food insecurity and hunger (Cox & Wallace, 2013; Gamblin, 2018). They are also more likely to drop out of school compared to children from nonincarcerated parents (Aaron & Dallaire, 2010; Nichols & Loper, 2012), which can further reinforce intergenerational poverty within a family. Research evidence additionally supports children who have had an incarcerated parent to be more likely to become incarcerated themselves, signifying the intergenerational impact of incarceration (Huebner & Gustafson, 2007; Kopak & Smith-Ruiz, 2016).

Children not only feel the absence of their incarcerated parent, but they may also feel trauma, shame, and stigma (Hariston, 2007). As an "adverse childhood experience," it has been linked to adverse outcomes such as asthma, depression, anxiety, and lower school retention rates (Lee et al., 2013). These children are additionally susceptible to a number of adverse developmental outcomes, including learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and other developmental delays (Lee et al., 2013; Wildeman & Turney, 2014). Prior studies, as summarized above, have illuminated the detrimental impact which having an incarcerated parent can have on children. However, less is known about the youth's own perceptions of this adverse experience (Hollins et al., 2019). Moreover, the actual numbers of children affected in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, the context of this study, are not known and it is difficult to identify and reach children with services, especially within the county's schools. Despite experiencing this adversity, many children are able to thrive and flourish, yet little research has been done to understand the factors that contribute to this type of resiliency. Some studies examining programming for incarcerated persons have recognized the importance of family involvement and participation as a major factor for success (Cotton, 2015; Williams et al., 2019). These studies focused on the views of the adults involved and did not report input or perspectives from children. There are limited studies that meaningfully engage children and youth directly in the participation of research related to their experiences of parental or caregiver incarceration and the impact on their lives and wellbeing. Engagement in participatory research processes has been a central activity for community psychology researchers and practitioners in their work to enhance wellbeing and redress social inequities (Lykes, 2017). Within the context of research with children of incarcerated parents (COIP), and in alignment with these core community psychology values, Hollins et al. (2019, p. 311) emphasize "in order to fully understand, serve and support these children, we must consult the true experts—those who have experienced being the child of an incarcerated parent."

To address these gaps, our research sought to answer: How does parental incarceration shape youth wellbeing? What do young people with experiences of parental incarceration recommend for policymakers and practitioners working to address their needs? Our specific aims were (1) to explore the impact of having an incarcerated parent on youth's (ages 10–18) wellbeing and (2) to identify recommendations from the youth based on their needs that address the challenges of having an incarcerated parent and promote individual and community flourishing.

1.1 | Theoretical framework

1.1.1 | Incarceration as a social determinant of health

The World Health Organization (2008) defines the social determinants of health as “the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age.” These conditions are inclusive of societal structures, institutions, and policies, which contribute to unequal distributions of power and resources and are mediated by social interactions. Taken together, these conditions have a negative impact on health, particularly for marginalized populations. In this paper, we cite the literature which shows that structural racism is an underlying social determinant, with incarceration rates as one of its proxies. The multigenerational impact of incarceration has also been well-documented, taking the largest toll on low-income communities and families, especially by perpetuating social and economic disadvantage and cumulative inequality (Baillargeon et al., 2010; Western & Pettit, 2010). Growing up in poverty increases the chance of being incarcerated and this holds true across racial, ethnic, and gender groups (Office of Justice Programs, 2004). Furthermore, being from a low socioeconomic status decreases a person's ability to pay off legal debt, which perpetuates socioeconomic disadvantage by reducing family income, limiting access to opportunities and resources, and increasing the likelihood of ongoing criminal justice involvement (Harris et al., 2010). Due to the intersection of race and class, the hardships imposed by incarceration on impoverished individuals reinforce racial inequities. According to the United States Census Bureau (2019), 40% of the US incarcerated population were African Americans (who made up only 13% of the overall US population) compared to 39% non-Hispanic Whites (who comprised 64% of the overall US population). In addition to socioeconomic disparities, policing practices structure racial inequities in incarceration rates. African Americans are more likely to be stopped and searched by police, issued multiple citations, and have warrants issued for failing to meet court-ordered obligations (United States Department of Justice, 2015).

1.1.2 | Flourishing

While the social determinants of health provide important social and historical context for inequities in well-being outcomes, it often places its emphasis on ill health as a result of the negative social determinants, while overlooking the strengths within the environment and the ways in which communities and individuals continue to flourish. Integrating a flourishing framework in alignment with the social determinants of health framework recognizes the existing social, built, and structural inequities while also recognizing the ways in which people continue to thrive. In other words, while we must continue to address and not minimize all of the social determinants to create more equitable well-being outcomes, we must also recognize that the existence of the various determinants of ill-health (i.e., exposure to violence, having an incarcerated parent) does not necessarily determine poor well-being outcomes or affect individuals in the same way. The strengths of individuals and their environment must also be promoted.

Flourishing describes the amalgamation of positive emotion, a sense of self-achievement and effective functioning (Barnhart et al., 2022). While this term is derived from the field of positive psychology and well-being theory, there's a growing body of research and aligned health efforts to promote flourishing within diverse fields of psychology, anthropology, public health, and medicine (Willen et al., 2022). This has challenged us to reframe our approach to physical and health research, policy, and practice. Approaches to studying mental health and health equity have focused heavily on health disparities and other deficit-based models (i.e., Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) which seek to measure the presence or absence of disease, morbidity, and mortality. Meanwhile, flourishing researchers aim to shift the focus to an asset-based model, recognizing that perceptions and experiences of health and well-being span beyond the treatment of pathology (Ginwright, 2018; Willen et al., 2022).

Ginwright (2018) applies a flourishing perspective to the ACES and the growing focus on trauma-informed care and discusses how the deficit-based focus can create blind spots in our efforts to support young people.

Trauma-informed care, like other deficit-based models, requires that we treat symptoms in people but provides very little insight into how we might address the root causes in neighborhoods, families, schools, and systems, or the ways that trauma and other forms of health are collectively experienced. By only treating the individual, we overlook the toxic systems, policies, and practices at the root of collective traumatic experiences, such as the incarceration of a parent. When we shift our focus to flourishing, we realign our efforts to the conditions which enhance wellbeing and foster possibility.

Within the context of trauma, Ginwright (2018) proposes what he refers to as healing-centered engagement, this expands how we think about responses to trauma and offers a more holistic approach to fostering wellbeing. Trauma and wellbeing through this lens are functions of the social determinants of health. When people advocate for policies and opportunities that address causes of trauma, these activities contribute to a sense of purpose, power, and control over life situations. All of these are ingredients necessary to restore wellbeing and healing. Healing-centered engagement with youth results from building a healthy identity, and a sense of belonging, and collectively advocating for policies and opportunities that address the root causes of ill health. These activities contribute to a sense of purpose, power, and control over life situations.

2 | METHODOLOGY

2.1 | Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)

YPAR is an approach to research and a youth engagement activity with the potential to promote flourishing on individual and societal levels. A YPAR approach can catalyze action and change, and promote a sense of purpose, power, and control over life situations facing youth. Youth participants are viewed as partners and co-creators of research and are trained by researchers to conduct action-oriented research to improve their lives, their communities, and the institutions that are intended to serve them (Dold & Chapman, 2012). The utility of the YPAR methodology for advancing research related to important aspects of youth health and wellbeing has been well documented. A 2018 systematic review of YPAR studies identified 63 prior studies that engaged youth in participatory research on a range of wellbeing-related topics (Anyon et al., 2018). A conceptual review (Ozer et al., 2020) specifically investigating YPAR and health equity highlighted the value of engaging youth in research because their unique expertise is needed for understanding and addressing key issues affecting youth health, development, and wellbeing. Ozer et al. (2020) also called for further creative, partnered YPAR research, which brings together the expertise of youth, youth-serving organizations, and academic scholars to investigate and evaluate research processes aimed at advancing health equity. While a few studies have utilized YPAR to engage youth who have experienced juvenile incarceration (Burk-Garcia, 2014; Desai, 2019), there remains limited empirical evidence that utilizes YPAR with children and youth who have an incarcerated parent within a community setting.

2.2 | Study setting

Cleveland faces significant racial inequities in terms of educational attainment, socioeconomic status, and health outcomes (Aliprantis et al., 2019); the city's long history of racist housing, real estate, and planning policies deliberately limited the opportunities for African Americans to essential resources for supporting their wellbeing (Kirwan Institute, 2015). During the 1930s, African Americans were explicitly excluded from community institutions, businesses, and labor markets and segregated into separate, less-resourced schools, housing structures, and hospitals (Encyclopedia of Cleveland History, 2020). Increasing discriminatory practices such as redlining and racial zoning kept Black/African American residents condensed within the eastside neighborhoods,

while White residents moved to outlying sections of the city and to adjacent rural areas that would later become suburbs (Kirwan Institute, 2015). Today, the population of the city continues to experience the ramifications of structural racism. Populations living in historically redlined neighborhoods of Cleveland are majority Black and continue to experience higher levels of poverty compared to the city overall. An estimated 42.2% of African Americans in the city live below the poverty level (compared to 24.7% of Whites) and an estimated 64% of African American households are receiving SNAP benefits (compared to 28% of Whites) (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Neighborhoods in Cleveland that are predominantly Black/African American have life expectancies up to 23 years lower than those in surrounding predominantly white suburbs (Warren & Ahern, 2019). Before starting this project specifically with youth who have an incarcerated parent, the researchers utilized a YPAR methodology to give youth voice to further understand how the neighborhood environment shapes youth health and to develop youth strategies for improving health outcomes (Benninger, Donley, et al., 2021; Benninger, Schmidt-Sane, et al., 2021). The youth reported their health to largely center around racial disparities in poverty, community infrastructure, crime, and incarceration. This aligned with an additional qualitative study conducted by Benninger, Donley et al. (2021) and Benninger, Schmidt-Sane et al. (2021), where community members reported the prevalence of incarceration amongst African Americans in the City of Cleveland to have a detrimental impact not only on the life of the incarcerated individual but on the wellbeing of extended family members.

2.3 | Participants and sampling

Participants were recruited with the assistance of the adult advisory board and the youth advisory board and through a partnering school. Participants were recruited purposively and included those with experiences of a parent or close family member who was currently or had been incarcerated during their lifetime. In total, 20 participants were included in the study (see Table 1). While race was not a part of the sampling criteria, the majority of the participants identified as Black, Latinx, or multiracial. The participants included a school-based YPAR group of 15 youth who were between the ages of 10 and 13 and a high school youth advisory board of 5 youths aged 16–18 who lived in various communities in the greater Cleveland region. The research has been approved by our institution's IRB and informed consent was obtained from all participants and their caregivers.

2.4 | Data collection and analysis

2.4.1 | Youth advisory board

The youth advisory board was involved in a series of two sessions focused on training around various research methods, designs, and research ethics. We discussed engaging data collection techniques such as photovoice, community walks, community mapping, surveys, journaling, and group discussion. We then engaged the youth in a series of sessions focused on developing a research program for school-age COIP. The youth selected from the various research methodologies that they felt would best fit the research aims. They also created a wellness-focused program to be integrated into the overall research program. They discussed how YPAR could serve a number of needs for children/youth who have experienced an incarcerated parent. Of greatest importance is the social support that it could provide for young people in the community, especially through connecting them to others who share their experiences. They also felt that YPAR could be used as a tool not only for youth to learn skills for collecting information on issues affecting their lives, but also for navigating through and coping with hardship. They developed the name *Youth for Youth* for the project and designed the project logo.

2.4.2 | YPAR lessons

We used our past research approach as a model that was tailored and co-designed with the youth advisory committee (see Benninger, Donley, et al., 2021; Benninger, Schmidt-Sane, et al., 2021). The model integrated Berkeley's YPAR Hub and other existing YPAR models as a template which was then adapted to our approach and to the Cleveland context and YPAR board priorities. These existing models have established and tested lesson plans which can be used and which cover a variety of topics, from introductions, root causes of challenges facing youth, defining youth's personal connection to the research question, and other related topics. The content of the lessons is provided in Table 2. We recorded and transcribed verbatim focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews when participants were comfortable being recorded. Due to the sensitive nature of the discussions, the school-based participants preferred not to be recorded, instead, the researchers took detailed field notes and completed a postsession form after each participant meeting describing the details of the session and the discussions.

2.4.3 | Semistructured interviews

We conducted semistructured interviews with youth to explore, in-depth, some of the issues that were arising from YPAR group discussions and to also identify strategies for improving policies and programming. Interviews were conducted with YPAR participants, but also with a broader sample of youth, to understand the perspectives of a wider range of young people who experience parental incarceration in their lifetime.

2.4.4 | FGDs

The youth advisory board recommended the use of FGD because of its ability to provide additional social support for youth with the shared experience of having an incarcerated parent and to provide a safe space for sharing. FGDs were semistructured, using a guide that was created and tested with the youth advisory board. Discussions were encouraged through probing questions as needed.

2.4.5 | Visual storytelling

Visual storytelling is a youth-centered approach that uses both visual and narrative platforms to narrate and describe the experiences of COIP. Storytelling coupled with the use of photography, video, drawing, and writing activities provided a comfortable space for young people to engage in the research by selecting their preferred form of communication. Storytelling can additionally instill a sense of identity and confidence in young people. Children who have experienced an incarcerated parent are often not provided with the opportunity to tell their stories and have them socially affirmed, which validates and legitimizes their experiences (Moola et al., 2020). When a story is not heard or affirmed, we run the risk of stereotyping entire communities or populations.

2.4.6 | Free writing/journaling

The journaling data collection method included participants sharing thoughts, ideas, feelings, and lived experiences through writing on the research topic (Hayman et al., 2012). Journaling is a useful tool for data collection due to its ability to combine personal reflections, accounts of events, and descriptions of experiences to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and meanings (Figure 1).

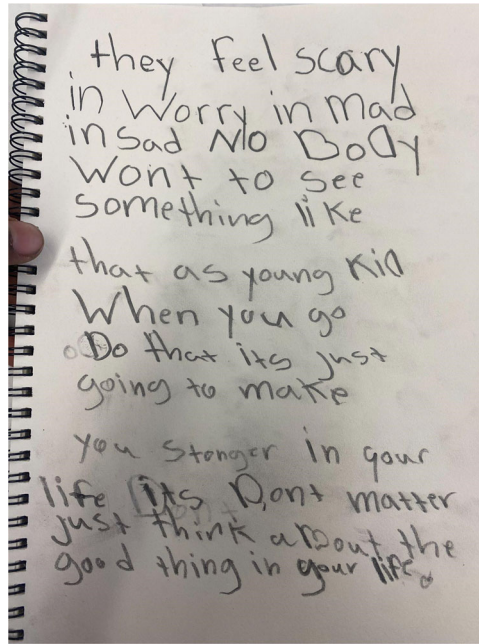


FIGURE 1 This image shows an example of one of the projects' journaling activities.

2.4.7 | Participant observation

We conducted ongoing participant observation using a “post-research session form” and structured questionnaire. Both adult and youth researchers completed this form after each session to reflect on how the YPAR session went, any challenges that might have emerged, and anything that needs to be changed for the following week. This provided a way to complement the data collection and provide context and additional knowledge.

2.4.8 | Data analysis

Data were analyzed using an inductive qualitative content analysis process (Bengtsson, 2016). We paired this with a deductive analytical approach where we mapped emergent themes from the data onto our theoretical framework. Two members of the research team followed the four stages of qualitative content analysis as proposed by Bengtsson (2016): (1) decontextualization, (2) recontextualization, (3) categorization, and (4) compilation (see Figure 2). The researchers utilized the qualitative data analysis software NVivo version 11 (QSR International) to organize the data analysis process.

During stage 1, the decontextualization stage, we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading through the transcribed text, field notes, and visual documents to obtain a sense of the whole. We then broke it down into smaller meaning units, which were labeled with a code and a code description. During the recontextualization stage, the researchers checked the data again, this time in alignment with the research aims and the theoretical framework. We paid attention to the references to the various social determinants of health/ill-health mentioned by the participants as well as the strengths and assets identified that promoted flourishing and engaged in a memoing process throughout the coding. We made sure to include in the coding and memos any nuances within the data. For example, participants mentioned being proud of their neighborhoods because of the services provided by local residents, while also being concerned by crime and inequality. During the categorization stage, themes and

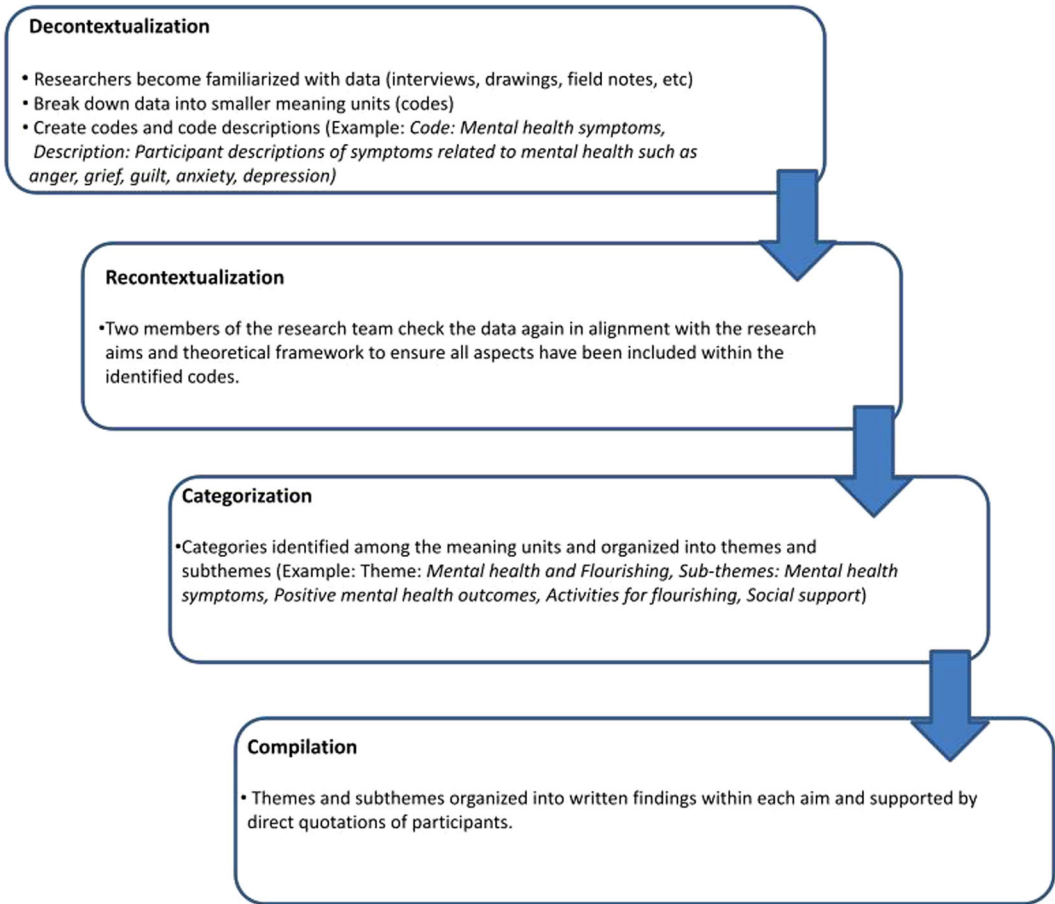


FIGURE 2 This image captures the stages of the qualitative content analysis process.

categories were identified among the meaning units and organized into themes and subthemes. During the compilation stage, the researchers pulled together the themes and subthemes and organized them into written findings in connection to each of the research aims and our theoretical framework and drew upon direct quotations to ensure the results remained grounded in the data.

To ensure the rigor of our findings, we had two researchers code and analyze the data and compare our results to ensure we were interpreting the data in the same way. We also considered our positionality in relation to our analysis, and we took as neutral a stance as possible and reflected continuously upon our objectivity. We additionally applied a member check process, where the results were summarized and shared with the participants to ensure their perspectives were captured accurately, while also respecting the anonymity and confidentiality of the group. The school-based participants then participated in a series of sessions that focused on translating the findings into a short animation to be shared with diverse stakeholders, including other children with incarcerated parents, teachers, nonprofit organization staff, and law enforcement. The researchers then worked with the youth advisory team to ensure that the animation captured the key themes which arose from the research and to devise a discussion guide to be used with diverse stakeholder groups to stimulate further action and support.

3 | FINDINGS

In this section, we will summarize the findings in connection with our paper's aims of exploring the impact of having an incarcerated parent on youth wellbeing and identifying youth recommendations that address the challenges of having an incarcerated parent and promote individual and community flourishing. We identified the following five overarching thematic categories established through the qualitative content analysis process: (1) youths' perceptions of their communities; (2) the Impact of incarceration on families and communities; (3) the Influence of incarceration on mental health and flourishing; (4) incarceration as a solution for community safety; and (5) addressing the impact of incarceration on children, families, and communities.

3.1 | The impact of having an incarcerated parent on youth wellbeing

3.1.1 | Youths' perceptions of their communities

To contextualize the research data within the communities and contexts of the youth participants, they were asked to describe their communities and their perceptions of community safety. The participants' perceptions of their communities varied, as some youth strongly identified with the neighborhood that they lived in, and others spoke about the community in relation to school (which was not necessarily in their neighborhood) and other spaces where they spent their time such as at home, a grandparent's house, or at a recreation center. Several participants discussed moving around, so did not identify with one area. One participant spoke about her community as the entire city, especially since she regularly engaged in various spaces throughout the city and recognized the similarities within all of those spaces and the need for city-wide initiatives to support families and promote equity.

The youth described opportunities for wellbeing within various spaces in their communities. For example, two participants described how children play outside regularly in their neighborhoods and how that made the community a nice place to live:

It's pretty cool for kids, like I see kids all the time walking around. It's a lot of stuff over here, like a lot of fast food and stores so I see a lot of kids like walking around and I don't really see no danger. I feel like the community is pretty good. (Participant 5, age 16)

One participant described the various city initiatives aimed at addressing racial inequities and building wealth, especially for Black families in her community:

I am proud of the community, that I am. I am proud to see you know, like. these hard-working minority families, being able to afford and have these nice homes like 2 car garages and things like that. It's just things that some people, it seems so farfetched for some you know and so to give access to for these people to have access to this like it's nothing it's just I'm proud of that....there's a company that builds houses in this area, even all over the east side. And they specifically rent their homes, they lease to own homes. Their newly renovated homes and they rent them to middle income minority families. So that way they won't gentrify the neighborhood, but they also are building houses and bringing revenue and income into the neighborhood. (Participant 3, age 18)

While many of the youth identified spaces where they felt safe within their communities, there was a general concern for the crime that was prevalent in neighborhoods throughout the city.

During a small group discussion and drawing activity with the younger youth (aged 10–13), several interconnected aspects of the neighborhood environment were mentioned in connection to safety which

contributed to a cumulative sense of feeling unsafe. Several participants (all female) mentioned not being safe walking down the street. Walking to and from the bus stop was also mentioned as dangerous. Some older men in the community were identified as creating an unsafe environment along with adults who did not listen “when children say no.” Two male participants described being afraid of being kidnaped if they walked around their community. School hallways were mentioned as being unsafe. Hearing gunshots or seeing blood also contributed toward feelings of not being safe. One of the younger youths discussed how he has to stay home alone often, so he watches his ring cameras on his phone to make sure no one breaks in. He also mentioned having four dogs to protect him. The participants commonly mentioned strategies they used to keep themselves safe. If someone threatens them, they have to talk back or fight back. Keeping to themselves was also a way they stayed safe.

The home was identified by most of the participants in the interviews and small groups as a safe environment. The participants mentioned feeling safe in their mother's rooms, or their own bedrooms where they could be alone. Participants with an unstable home or family environment mentioned spending as much time as possible at work or at other spaces for recreation.

During one of the individual interviews, an 18-year-old participant described how her block was not too bad but that there was a lot of gun violence everywhere in Cleveland and that this was the biggest threat to safety. She further described how policies for obtaining guns were too relaxed and how she knew of kids who were able to buy them easily through sellers on the internet or take them from their parents who did not have them locked up appropriately.

I know a lot of people in the younger ages like 12 that got guns like I don't think that, I think they need to get their laws together because that's something that shouldn't have been passed. Because now you got younger people on here and I'm not saying that they just started doing it, but younger people in general are like, “oh now I can carry a gun on me” and stuff like that. (Participant 1, age 18)

In terms of addressing community safety, many participants challenged the effectiveness of the current policing strategies. Participants perceived the police to be dangerous and ineffective in improving community safety. For example:

The police do not make anything safer. They take away your animals. They take away people and it is not fair. The police took away my dad. (Participant 6, age 10)

It's always going to be cops around, though nobody wants cops. Every time we see a police officer come past we just stop playing basketball thinking that something will happen because that's how it is and some people will be scared. Nobody should be scared of a police officer because it's like they have too much power and they enforce their power too much. You can't have fun in your own neighborhood because you see someone < police > and you get scared. (Participant 4, age 17)

3.1.2 | Impact of incarceration on families and communities

The participants in this study spoke about incarceration in relation to its impact on themselves, their families, and the broader community. Many of the participants gave accounts of witnessing parents and close family members being taken away by the police. Sometimes this was done in a violent manner, especially if the family member was resisting the arrest. This created a perception of distrust in the police and fear of police violence. For example, in the following account, a participant describes how when he was 5 years old he and his other young siblings witnessed the arrest of their father:

We was walking down the street. And I guess they noticed him or something. They pinned him down. At first he was resistant. We were all right there. He was resistant and he ended up getting slammed to the ground and pinned and they arrested him and took him away. That was the first time I've seen anyone get arrested. Second time, I was seven. Second time was the time where he was actually going for years. I was around 12 when he came out. So he was gone for five years. (Participant 4, age 16)

Narratives such as the one described above around witnessing a parent's arrest were common among the participants. These were described as scary and confusing experiences. In another example, a 10-year-old participant mentioned that he was afraid when his father was arrested so he distracted himself by playing with his toys. Other participants mentioned similar ways of coping with the arrest, such as distracting themselves by playing video games and by playing with siblings and cousins. For some of the participants, the adults around them did not talk to them about the arrest or where their parents were going. This made their experience especially confusing and anxiety-provoking.

Incarceration was described to not only impact their parents, but as a larger issue affecting their extended family and community members:

It's a lot of people around me that's been in and out.... It takes a toll because of how long it can be. It's like, you try to be there but after a while the calls and like, it will get to a person. So, you start to disassociate yourself. But then, they will be like, "Oh why you stopped?" and it's like "I couldn't no more". Like my friend just went to prison in January and he was telling me how he just feels down, because when he first went in and all the people he was in school with, they just left him and I feel bad because that's kinda what I did to a lot of people and I was only seeing this side until he told me. (Participant 5, age 16).

In the above narrative, the participant explains how psychologically draining it can be trying to maintain relationships and support incarcerated family members and friends. A sense of helplessness was commonly reported by the study participants in relation to their experiences of incarceration with parents, family, and other community members:

Interviewer 1: Do you think there's anything that could have helped support you during that time that you didn't have?

Participant: I don't know. I think about that a lot, too. And I don't know anything would have actually helped me because I was stuck on not having my family. Well, I have a family and all that but you know I don't have all of my family members so, I didn't know what can help me or what couldn't help. You're just stuck on, "what happened to my family?" (Participant 4, age 17)

Feelings of helplessness seemed to be reinforced for participants whose parents experienced recidivism. This was coupled at times with broken promises related to being in their lives:

I am not really close to my dad after he been in and out. After so many times, it is just like, no, not going to try if you aren't trying. (Participant 5, age 16)

Like our mom tried to reach out to us and she was saying how she missed us and how she wants to come back and see us and all that stuff. Well, it never happened. So like she reached out to us, and

the stuff that she said was basically lies, because it never happened. And then that, you know, my anger would go up... (Participant 4, age 17)

During a small group discussion with the 10–13-year-old young people, they discussed how incarceration affected most people in their communities and the toll that it took on their lives, especially their psychological well-being. For many, the incarcerated were people who they had close relationships with such as uncles and aunts and for the older youth, it included close friends.

My uncle went to jail, we played basketball together. We used to go everywhere together. He used to say "wherever the world take me, that's where we go." (Participant 7, age 10)

The participant went on to explain how every day he looks forward to when his uncle will get out of jail and they can play basketball and go on trips together. When he misses his uncle, he reflects on the fun that they used to have and their future when he gets out of prison.

Navigating family relationships. Participants described various ways that adults communicated with them about the incarceration of their parents, such as writing a letter, sitting them down and discussing it, or not discussing it at all. For example:

Well, it was very helpful only because like I said, I think I was eight or nine and he took us to Chuck E Cheese and just was like "I'm going to be gone." And I don't think he wanted to explain to us that he was going to jail, because we were so young, or he didn't want to explain to us why he was going to jail because we were so young. But when he wrote the letter he explained it. So in my personal opinion, my dad's writing the letter was very helpful and spending time with us before he left was very helpful because, I don't know how to explain, like it was very helpful to me like getting the letter and I understood where my dad was. I knew what jail was and I knew why he went. (Participant 1, age 18)

Participants found the approaches where adults communicated honestly and openly to be the most helpful. Participants who had guardians or parents who tried to hide information from them were often left with feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. Many participants mentioned a need to stay strong for their families while their parents were incarcerated, and often took on a parenting role for their siblings. Participants described their parents to need them while they were in prison and also when they were released, because they did not develop the social skills to be successful on their own. There also was a common narrative around having to grow up fast and take on adult-like responsibilities while still a child.

Like he <her brother> felt like he had to take up the role of a parent. So like he will always have to make sure to take care of me and my brother so we get good grades, do our chores and stuff like that, because he felt like he had to take control. (Participant 2, age 18)

The youth with incarcerated parents were often concerned about their parents' safety in prison. During a journal activity with the younger youth, one participant wrote: "Dear Dad, I didn't like it when you were in jail. I was scared I was gonna lose you. Mom was scared but I had to stay strong for the family" (Participant 9, age 12). Other participants described their safety concerns:

So he <incarcerated father> told me that the guards are horrible and the nurses too. My dad got sick and they brushed it off, they just kept brushing it off... it was something with his colon... it was very serious. (Participant 1, age 18)

While not all participants were able to or wanted to maintain a relationship with their incarcerated parents, many described helpful ways relationships were maintained.

Being able to talk to him, really, really helped. It would have been better, you know, if we could see each other probably, but I feel like I talked to him pretty much every day, so I was fine. I always had access to him. We would email, I would send him pictures, he would send me pictures, he would send me videos. So we are fine. (Participant 3, age 18)

Other participants expressed anger and apathy toward their incarcerated parents and were not making any effort to maintain a relationship. Another participant mentioned wanting to maintain a relationship with his mother and the sense of abandonment and sadness he felt because she had not spoken with him in years. Participants mentioned the importance of giving a child the choice around if and how they wanted to maintain a relationship unless it was dangerous for them to do so. They stressed how it was important for the parent or guardian who was not incarcerated to recognize that it was their parent, to set their emotions aside and be supportive of the needs that a child may have to stay connected or for their need to distance themselves from that parent if the relationship is a harmful one.

3.1.3 | Incarcerations' influence on mental health and flourishing

Incarceration was described by the participants to be largely rooted in issues around mental health that worsened for incarcerated individuals. Jails and prisons were described to be environments that were not supportive of the mental health needs of inmates or of effective behavioral change.

So I don't really think taking away everything or taking away society for people completely is a correct way to reform behavior because in the end, most people turn out worse than when they went in, most people go back and if they don't go back, they want to go back. A lot of people commit suicide, because they just feel so overwhelmed they don't have family anymore, or they lost contact with the family, they have. There's just so much more harm than good done. (Participant 3, age 18)

Furthermore, incarcerating a parent had an impact on the mental health of the family members, especially children. All of the in-depth interview participants and many of the school group participants mentioned changes in their own mental health and behavior after their parents or close family members were arrested. Participants mentioned acting out more in school and at home and their grades dropping.

It was other things that affected my mental health like school affected it. My grades dropped horribly. Like I'm a high honor roll student, I don't let my grades drop but once my dad went to jail, I was acting out, like I would skip classes. I didn't do no work, I stopped doing my work. And it just, it wasn't the best, like nothing else helped and I was just a very upset kid because I didn't have my dad. (Participant 1, age 18)

Anger was the most commonly reported change in behavior:

The main thing that really changed was I started developing anger issues. Which is, that's what a lot of kids develop after seeing that or witnessing something like that. Yeah, just having major anger issues. Or something just be off about the attitude, about not even just that situation but life in general because like, wow, there's nothing you can do about that. Like you're seven-years-old. What

can I do? Oh, my God, don't take them away. I need them. They're gonna be like, I gotta do my job. There's nothing you could do even as an adult, there's nothing you can do. You see someone that you actually love get arrested because of something that they did. (Participant 4, age 17)

Participants also commonly experienced feelings of grief and depression. One participant explained: "It's like losing someone, like they passed away. You don't get to see them, you can't talk to them in the same way. It makes people feel broken and worried because they don't know what is going to happen" (Participant 6, age 12). Certain events made it especially difficult, like father-daughter dances, which served as a reminder of the absence of the parent:

It affected my mental health because at the time when I was staying with my birth mother, I had my step-dad and we didn't have the best relationship but we were okay. And it was like father-daughter dances that I missed out on because I didn't have my dad or me just being envious or jealous of other girls' relationships with their dad. It's like I miss my dad. That was the only thing, my mental health did get affected. It wasn't the best because I didn't have my dad. (Participant 1, age 18)

As stated in the prior quote, even for those who maintained a relationship with the parent, the relationship changed, and the parent could not be present in person for important milestones. Other participants mentioned internalizing or bottling up emotions to protect themselves and others. For example, we heard that "we don't like to tell people stuff like that. We was always the type of people to keep it inside. Don't let people know you are in pain, so they can't use it against you" (Participant 2, age 18). This was a common strategy mentioned by the younger youth as well. Holding in and bottling up emotions out of either distrust in adults or fear that being vulnerable about what you are going through would get held against you. Others described the incarceration of their parents as a traumatic event and an on-going traumatic experience, especially for those whose parents struggled with recidivism. Many youths described the traumatic experience of witnessing their parent get taken away by the police.

Some participants also experienced feelings of suicidal ideation. Two participants mentioned having siblings who were suicidal and the ways that they tried to help their siblings, as seen in the following account.

So my anger just kept going up, like going up and up and, and the pain of that was just going up. And then my big brother who was going through a lot, my oldest brother was starting to do drugs and stuff. And he kept going in and out of the hospital. My sister was being very suicidal. And I was too, and my big brother, he was just crazy. (Participant 4, age 17).

While some participants mentioned counseling to be helpful, others discussed barriers to receiving counseling, including family members not feeling comfortable with them going to someone to discuss personal family issues. Not all participants wanted counseling or found it to be helpful:

The counseling don't help at all. I have been to so many counselors, tried so many counselors. I feel like you need counselors for certain situations. Like, if you get a counselor, they haven't been through your situation. I don't really think they could help you, because they don't know what you are going through. (Participant 5, age 16)

Participants described people and activities that helped them cope with the arrest of their parents, such as distracting themselves by playing with toys, video games, and sports or talking to family members. Two participants (aged 16 and 17) wanted more informal forms of mentoring or support from adults, especially from adults who were not being paid to talk to them, but who genuinely cared about their well-being. They wanted adults to teach them

about life, such as how to open a bank account, get into college, or find a job. Many participants mentioned turning to other youth for support, such as their siblings, cousins, close friends, or significant others who they trusted.

It would be so weird because I never had anybody that would just sit there and listen to you venting about something and <name> just listens...doesn't say anythingshe just literally sits there and listens. I really appreciate that. Nobody does that. That's not like getting paid....I appreciate it and I know she can hear me. (Participant 5, age 17)

While the youth mentioned having an incarcerated parent would pose various barriers to their mental health, they commonly discussed how it did not define who they were or who they will become and the various ways they continued to flourish. The participants had a number of hopes and aspirations for their future and were actively pursuing those goals, an important part of flourishing. For example, one participant mentioned receiving a full scholarship to a university where she plans on studying neuroscience and premedicine. Another participant was entering her first year of college and majoring in Psychology. One of the high school youth discussed his various strategies for preparing for independence. He was currently working and actively seeking advice around important life skills such as opening a bank account, getting a driver's license, and furthering his education. Healthy outlets for coping with mental health were also mentioned:

Journaling, like I started writing down my feelings and emotions, because I wasn't able to like, it wasn't like I was not able to, I didn't want to talk to anybody because I was like a closed off person... so writing stuff down really helped. (Participant 1, age 18)

Participants also mentioned sports, such as football, gymnastics, and track, to have a positive impact on their physical and mental health. "When I got older and got introduced to football, I used all my anger on my workout" (Participant 2, age 18). Other participants stressed the importance of supportive community spaces for children and youth, such as after-school programming and recreation centers. Support from close family, friends, and significant others was also identified to help them get through tough times, boost their mental health, and reestablish healthy relationships.

Facilitator: Who do you think helped support you while you were going through this?

Participant: My cousins. They are around my age. My friends. (Participant 5, age 16)

3.2 | Youth recommendations to address the challenges from having an incarcerated parent and promote individual and community flourishing

3.2.1 | Incarceration as an unhelpful solution for community safety

When discussing recommendations for how to better support the needs of the youth, safety was brought up as a pressing community issue, however incarceration was described by the majority of the participants to not be a sustainable solution for keeping their communities safe or making them safer. It was at most a method for containing a situation or for holding an individual accountable for their actions, which did not ultimately result in crime reduction in the neighborhood. While the police were viewed as needed to temporarily de-escalate violent situations, incarceration in general was not viewed to make communities safer.

I can give you an example of how it's <incarceration> not helpful, but when it comes to being helpful it's just like one less person that we've had to worry about trying to harm somebody. That's the only

helpful way I could think of. But I have a million ways I can think of how it's unhelpful, because I know people, how people are, how people think, and I hate stuff like that. I lost a friend to gun violence and that friend was in a gang and so his gang would retaliate with the other person who just shot him, and it's a back and forth type of situation. So you still have people out there and you can get arrested but it's still gonna be like consequences for your people. (Participant 1, age 18)

In a small group discussion with the 10–13-year-old youth, they agreed that it is important to put “bad people” in jail, but they also thought that there were too many innocent people there too. When the facilitator asked for clarity, they said that it is mostly Black people, rather than White people and that police do not give Black people the benefit of the doubt. They also mentioned that so many Black people were incarcerated because they thought it was a way for the police to reduce the “threat.” Another participant mentioned the need for mutual accountability between civilians and police. If civilians are to be held accountable for their actions, police must also be held to the same accountability, and this could help reduce the high levels of unjust arrests.

3.2.2 | Addressing the impact of incarceration on children, families, and communities

While there was often a sense that the situation could not be changed and that young people were often powerless to change it, the participants also expressed a significant amount of hope and eagerly shared their recommendations for addressing the impact of incarceration on themselves and their communities. These fell within the five categories of (1) criminal justice policy and policing, (2) communities, (3) parents, (4) schools and service providers, and (5) children with incarcerated parents.

Criminal justice system policy and policing. The participants discussed the root causes of the high incarceration rates experienced by their communities and the need for rethinking policy and interventions to address them. They recognized issues around community safety to be rooted in deeper systemic challenges related to poverty, mental health, and racism, all of which were perpetuated by the current living conditions (i.e., poverty, segregation) and policies (i.e., policing) affecting the wellbeing of individuals in their communities. For example, poverty and money were identified to be driving forces of incarceration. Several of the youth explained that when people do not have access to high-quality jobs that pay well, and when they have been disenfranchised for generations, they turn to illegal means to make money and to obtain the material possessions that more privileged individuals have access to. Others explained it to be driven by a desire for fast, easy money and material possessions.

Lot of people do it for money reasons. If people were open to offering jobs to even felons or like, it's more so jobs. You have lazy people, you have people who choose to do it the way that my dad did it, like they just need a way to get easy money but just offering more jobs to people, that would definitely help because that's your source of income. You don't have to be on your own selling drugs then you are like robbing people...I mean you have like a lot of jobs out here but offer more jobs to like felons. I know felons more so need help. I have a friend who's a felon he can't get a job. (Participant 1, age 18)

Racism was identified as a driving force of high incarceration rates. For example, one participant connected the high incarceration rates of Black people to the history of slavery in the United States:

I feel like that honestly, what makes incarceration rate so high, because you are taking something completely away, they have no access to society, they don't know how to use technology, they don't know the newest anything out unless it comes up in the news and then you're just like okay go back and figure it out. I like to tie it back into slavery and I know it sounds weird at first, but we as Black

people were held back for let's just say 100 years because it was more than that, but let's just say, we were 100 years behind and then we were just like okay you're free, figure it out. Well, we still have to make up for that hundred years while still trying to keep up with what's going on now. So at what point unless the world stops will we make up that 100 years, will we be able to catch up, we have to work twice as hard, we have to figure it out twice as fast and it's just like, now people think, "Oh, but you're equal like you're free like what is the complaint?" but you don't realize that 100 years or that five years or 10 years that you missed is so detrimental, because you had it. So I don't really think taking away everything or taking away society for people completely is a correct way to reform behavior because in the end, most people turn out worse than when they went in, most people go back and if they don't go back, they want to go back. (Participant 3, age 18)

Another participant explained how in this country "you get incriminated because of your skin color" (Participant 4, age 17). He further discussed how he learned this lesson at an early age:

Even at five I was very intelligent. I still don't know how to explain it but at five I was intelligent for my age. I understood way too much. But at the same time, I didn't understand that much. Because it's just why, why do cops do this? Like is it <being Black> a target on your back? I didn't know what to think. So I was like, every time I see a cop car, when I was little I'd be scared because I'm like, what if that happens to me? (Participant 4, age 17)

The participants explained how addressing high rates of incarceration requires reform within the policing system, including more police accountability as well as addressing the persisting socioeconomic inequities facing minority families through opportunities for building wealth within dominantly minority communities.

For like, central government and stuff like that, I would just mainly say, don't try to give cops as much power as they think they do. Enforce more rules for cops to follow and if they don't follow those rules there should be a consequence. Like, a cop really ain't supposed to turn off their body cam. But a cop does turn off their body cam and that's something you are not supposed to do that's literally in rule and they don't get punished for stuff like that. That's something that really needs to happen. If they do something that violates the rules of their job, they should get punished for that. Just like how everybody gets punished for something if they violate any rules, everybody and anybody should be held accountable for their wrong doings whether they are kids or adults. Police officers, regular citizens, government workers, everybody should get a form of punishment no matter what status they have to lean on. (Participant 4, age 17)

I like, there's a company that builds... they build houses in this area even all over the east side. And they specifically rent their homes, they lease to own homes, and they rent them. Their newly renovated homes and they rent them to middle income minority families. So that way they won't gentrify the neighborhood, but they also are building houses and bringing revenue and income into the neighborhood. (Participant 3, age 18)

Reform around gun laws and increasing gun safety practices in the home were also mentioned by one of the participants as solutions for addressing violence and reducing incarceration rates (Figure 3).

I think they just made a law where it's open carry, you don't have to have a license to carry a gun. That's not good, because, I know a lot of people in the younger ages like 12 that got guns, like I don't think that, I think they need to get their laws together because that's something that shouldn't have

TABLE 2 YPAR program agenda.

Week #	Title	Objectives
1	Introductions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PAR session: Introduce the project, and get to know participants. Discuss photovoice ethics. Participants take a photo that represents themselves with a brief description of the photo and what it represents • Mentoring session: Building rapport/getting to know the participants. Building trust. Introducing breathing techniques • Weekly wellness challenge (mindful breathing).
2	Self-identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PAR session: Focus group discussion around self and identity/photo sharing • Mentoring session: Building a positive identity lesson • Weekly wellness challenge: Acupressure, connecting your mind and body.
3	Challenges facing COIP/understanding the roots and branches of challenges facing COIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • YPAR session: Discussion of challenges facing youth, roots and branches lesson plan focused on challenges facing COIP and trying to understand the root causes • Participants are tasked with taking photos/creating something visual (such as a picture, collage) that represents the identified • Challenge to them • Mentoring session: Language for emotions/healthy expression of emotions • Weekly wellness challenge: Aromatherapy noticing how the smells around you feel in your body and mind.
4	Defining the research questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • YPAR session: Defining the research questions lesson plan, participants tasked with taking additional photos that represent the issue/further answer the research questions • Mentoring session: Empathy • Weekly wellness challenge: Movement: how we connect with the world around us.
5	Your personal connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PAR session: Your personal connection story-telling activity, Participants tasked with taking photos/ drawing a picture, or writing a story that represents resilience or coping • Mentoring session: Problem-solving • Weekly wellness challenge: Bringing it all together: Review techniques benefits and challenges, and prepare for a deeper dive.
6	Resilience/personal and community strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PAR session: Resilience discussion • Mentoring session: Coping • Weekly wellness challenge: Understanding the physiological effects and benefits.
7	Additional data collection method (TBD, i.e., survey, walking tour, individual interviews with stakeholders)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PAR session: To be determined • Program session: Social support • Weekly wellness challenge: Developing a wellness strategy (how can you do this in your day-to-day life)/ wellness wheel.

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Week #	Title	Objectives
8	Solutions and action planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PAR session: Creating solutions/action planning • Program session: Collective action • Weekly wellness challenge: Review techniques and challenges to incorporating wellness strategies.

Abbreviations: COIP, children of incarcerated parents; PAR, participatory action research; TBD, to be determined; YPAR, Youth Participatory Action Research.

TABLE 3 Participants' messages to children of incarcerated parents.

Messages from the YPAR group for other children with incarcerated parents	
Example #	Example quotes
1	"I know what you are going through I have been where you are at."
2	"Just keep trying 'just keep swimming' I know it's hard but just know you keep going."
3	"I want you to know that everything is Oh, they will be out soon. life is hard sometimes. I understand it's hard sometimes, you will get through it I promise."
4	"What I would say to someone with family in jail is they will be back and they not forget you."
5	"Keep your head up and stay strong, also just try not to think about it. Or you can do things you would do if they was out."
6	"My uncle went to jail, we played basketball together. We used to go everywhere together. He used to say "wherever the world take me, that's where we go." My message to other kids who are going through that experience is "Don't worry about how long until they come back, think about all the things you're gonna do together." "Don't think about the time, just focus on the future."
7	"Stay connected. You will regret it later on." (Participant 5, age 16)
8	"You just really have to let people learn on their own, they have to learn, they have to grow and they have to you know find out what works best for them. What worked best for me and my dad was emailing and phone calls every day. Some people may need that in person, I didn't need it, I was fine without it, you know. Some people might want to do videos every day, some people may not want to talk every day at all, you know? It's just, you find what works best for you and your parents and you go from there, and you learn and grow and you just enjoy your childhood." (Participant 3, age 18)

Abbreviation: YPAR, Youth Participatory Action Research.

been passed. Because now you got younger people out here, and I'm not saying that they just started doing it, but younger people in general are like, "oh now I can carry a gun on me" and stuff like that. I don't know, people are influenced a lot. I can say that. So like one person will influence another to kill somebody...it's a lot of unhelpful ways. (Participant 1, age 18)

Communities. The participants provided advice for communities and the individuals within them to support families with incarcerated family members. They discussed the various levels of support needed within the community and the value of extended family and other social networks.

I believe in the saying it takes a village to raise a child, because while my dad was gone everyone around me stepped up so that void could be somewhat filled, you know you can never really fill the

void of a parent, but you know I had my family. All my jobs were always more than helpful, and it's just stuff that you don't even realize that like "oh, if I have another parent, you know it will be taken care of or I will be fine." And yeah so I just feel like in a community, like <name of housing network>, I have an internship with them, and I am exposed to so many different opportunities that I feel like I wouldn't be exposed to if I wasn't like you know in their community and I feel like that is something that they did to support me and they helped me find jobs and stuff like that. So you should definitely live in a community that supports you and understands you and I definitely think having your family involved really helps. (Participant 3, age 18)

The participants from the school-based YPAR group mentioned strategies that they and other youth can implement to stay safe in their communities, such as having dogs in the house to protect you, cameras, setting up traps for burglars, and learning how to fight back. Having supportive family members, such as grandparents around, also made the youth feel safer. Providing more safe spaces where young people can go to be safe and engage in positive activities was an additional solution identified by the participants. For example, engaging in sports was mentioned to be a healthy outlet for anger and helpful for building social connections.

I would just say, get into sports, because it will be the best bet. Keep you distracted from all the stuff. (Participant 2, age 18)

Another participant mentioned the power that the older community members have in influencing the younger members of the community.

Like certain people have power. If you have been the person that has been in the neighborhood for a long time, people will listen to you, especially if you are older too. I have never seen anybody, whether they were in the streets, out of streets, do anything disrespectful to the old person when they said something about something they don't like that happened on the street they had been on for a long time. But like, people that have power or voice should basically try to explain like, this is something they don't want any kid to go through, like telling adults like, we understand this is how you live but try to keep the kids out of it. Keep the kids away from it so we don't have generations of the same thing going on and on again....we should not have generations raised to join gangs but we should have generations ready to do something about this. (Participant 4, age 17)

Schools and service providers. Participants mentioned that it could be helpful to communicate with schools about the incarcerated family members so that they are able to provide or connect the student with the extra support and resources that they may need as they are coping with this transition and loss.

Like the teachers, if they know the situation, I think that they should be more considerate. I am not saying that they should not be considerate but more considerate towards those people whose parent is incarcerated. (Participant 1, age 18).

Most of the participants mentioned that they never told the school or talked to school teachers or counselors about their parent's incarceration. Reasons included not trusting the school, feeling like they could be judged or have it held against them, emphasizing the need to keep personal issues to yourself, and feeling like it would not make a difference.

I feel like Cleveland schools in general, they just don't care. Because they used to situations like this, so this is normal. They don't really care. (Participant 2, Age 18)

Other participants mentioned the need for teachers in the schools to pay attention, without judging or punishing, to the behavior changes of their students and to be there to listen to them when they feel comfortable talking about why they are experiencing those changes:

The best type of support I would say for people that's inside the schools is to try to understand the situation that they are going through because you are already an adult. Like, to you trauma, it's not as high as it is but they are kids. Even if you are an adult you see someone that you really love get arrested. You know how the court system is more than a little kid does. So, if a kid is going through that, you try to talk to the kid about it, try to understand the situation better so then like you can actually work towards getting the kid the help that they need. (Participant 4, age 17)

Interviewer: What type of recommendations do you have? It can be like, for parents, teachers, social workers. I guess more for like working with kids who are dealing with parents who are incarcerated. Do you have any recommendations for them or suggestions?

Participant: Pay attention to the way they act. I don't know how to explain it. If you see that they are starting to change in a way, don't go up and confront them but like slowly look and see what's changing and then talk to them. Don't go off or the child or whoever snaps, it's not because they are trying to be disrespectful or anything. It's so much that they got built up. That will just be the breaking point. (Participant 5, age 16)

Supporting families with incarcerated family members through the provision of universal school meals and before and after-school programming was also discussed. This can help alleviate the financial strain on families, especially for single working parents, and provide safety for children.

Recommendations for improving mental health. Increasing the accessibility of formal mental health services in communities for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals, individuals transitioning from prison, and children and families with incarcerated family members were suggested by the participants. Other participants who did not find counseling to be helpful, accessible, or culturally appropriate mentioned the value of having someone to talk to who understood or shared a similar experience. This did not have to be a formal counselor but could be through informal social networks or mentoring.

I also think every school should have an actual counselor like a licensed one. Just so you know, kids have things that they need to get out of their chest and talk to, and again having that person who's professional look at and give you their perspective on your life is just great to have. (Participant 3, age 18)

Participants expressed the need for opportunities to support flourishing, for example focusing on activities that are fun and bring joy instead of just focusing on talking about what is going wrong.

Interviewer: Is there anything that does help with your counseling or something that you wish you had more of?

Participant: Like vacations. I take a couple, like my birthday just passed and I wanted to do something where I can get away from reality and just go have fun. It worked. That little 3 days outside of home, like I felt refreshed. (Participant 5, age 16)

We (participant and formerly incarcerated mother) talk about certain situations a little more. We watched movies for my birthday. We just talked and watched movies and spent some time to bond. (Participant 5, age 16)

Parents. Honest, open communication was emphasized by the participants as the best approach to handling the incarceration of a parent with children and youth. Even at a young age, the youth felt they were able to comprehend what was happening to their parent, and being able to talk about it openly further allowed them to make sense of the situation:

I would suggest you know just be honest. Tell them what's going on, tell them like you know it doesn't mean you lose your parent completely that just means you may not see them when you feel like it or be able to call them when you feel like it, but you will still be able to talk to them, you will still be able to see them. (Participant 3, age 18)

For adults, they should just, it's hard again because of the situation, it just depends on the situation, but adults should be open to being able to allow the kids to talk to them. That's one thing. (Participant 1, age 18)

Providing the space to listen to the concerns and needs of children was also suggested by the participants. Several mentioned their parents trying to ignore the subject or hide information about the incarcerated parent from them, or make decisions without including the incarcerated parent.

In my situation I feel like, if your guardian might be a family member and if you do want to have a relationship with your parent on the phone or most of the time, I feel like the guardian and the parent should talk. Say for instance you ask your guardian for something, I feel like, it shouldn't be like, "Oh your guardian should make the final decision" or your parent should make the final decision. I feel it should be a mutual agreement. Because I mean they are still your parent even though it's not legally your parent at the moment. I mean they are still your parent. So, I feel like to keep them involved in the loop, have a little say so over things even though they aren't gonna be there. I feel like they should have a say so, come to an agreement or something. (Participant 5, age 16)

Advice for children with incarcerated parents. The participants shared advice for other children who were dealing with having an incarcerated parent. Messages centered around empathy, emphasizing that they are not alone and on positive forward thinking. Additional messages from the participants encouraged staying connected to incarcerated parents. The participants from the school YPAR group wrote down their messages and placed them anonymously in a box to share. Examples of their messages are included in Tables 3.

4 | DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKING

4.1 | Implications for practice and policy to support COIP needs

Thanks to social media, political campaigns, and celebrity interest, there has been an increase in attention toward incarceration and problems within the justice system. Unfortunately, this interest has not trickled down

to the youngest, and sometimes most affected individuals, the COIP. This study provides in-depth qualitative data centering on the experiences and perspectives of youth who have been affected by having an incarcerated parent. More specifically, we utilized a YPAR approach in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, to explore the impact of having an incarcerated parent on youth wellbeing and to develop youth strategies to address the needs and challenges of having an incarcerated parent and to promote flourishing. Study findings highlight the impact which incarceration has beyond the convicted individual, it affects children, families, and entire communities. These insights, although not intended to be generalizable to the entire COIP population, can contribute toward the development and refinement of programs and policies intended to support their needs and promote flourishing children and communities.

4.1.1 | Universal interventions

Universal interventions can assist children who are coping with this challenge without singling them out or creating stigma. Interventions identified by the study participants included recommendations like universal school lunch and free afterschool programming to especially support single parents who may not have the financial resources to provide safe spaces for their children while they are at work, or who need respite. Many urban school districts are already providing these types of services. Universal wellness and social and emotional learning programming were also discussed, and these could be integrated into schools and after-school programming. For example, this could include providing the time for journaling as a means of expressing emotions, and athletics and movement-based activities for letting out stress and anger.

4.1.2 | Social connections and support

Children and youth may also be in need of connecting with others who have had a similar experience and strengthening family relationships. The participants in this study exhibited a strong sense of empathy for children who were experiencing an incarcerated parent. They wanted other children to know that they were not alone, to not give up hope, and to focus on positive present and future aspirations. This advice could be leveraged by schools and social services when working with COIP. They also expressed family is a key source of social support and a need for improving communication and relationships with close family members. Providing opportunities for young people with shared experiences to support each other could provide positive mental health benefits. For example, our work with our youth advisory team and local partnering organizations has included the coordination of outings (such as hiking) and community events with relationship-building activities specifically for children and youth with incarcerated parents and their families.

4.1.3 | Avoiding stigma and blame

Finding ways to normalize the children's experiences of having incarcerated family members so that students know that they are not alone within the dialogue used at school was recommended to assist with lightening the stigma and increasing social support. At the same time, it is also imperative to recognize and point out to young people that the mass incarceration of parents especially within dominantly Black and minority-serving school districts is a systemic issue. Youth should be supported to understand the social-historical context of racial inequities, to shift the blame away from themselves, their families, and their communities, and contextualize it within racialized histories and structures. This study and a large body of youth research evidence support that young people are capable of understanding and thinking critically about social policies and the ways that they

affect their communities (Benninger, Donley, et al., 2021; Benninger, Schmidt-Sane, et al., 2021; Branquinho et al., 2020; Ozer et al., 2020). During the interviews, the students acknowledged challenges within their neighborhoods and their schools that are connected to the impact of systematic racism, including poverty, gun violence, poor policing, and incarceration. They also discussed feelings of shame related to parental incarceration, indicating that they may be taking ownership of the systematic problems instead of properly placing blame on larger entities at play. According to Morsy and Rothstein (2016), African Americans are incarcerated at significantly higher rates than Whites and their interactions with the police are often more contentious. It is important that youth facing these difficulties are aware of the systems at play so that they can invoke protective factors to combat these systems and reduce shame regarding their realities. The United States has over 400 years of acts of injustice toward Black and Brown people to account for, therefore, the collective rage we see amongst people of color should be validated not consequence or dismissed (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021). Often in the educational system, Black families are constructed as “the problem,” which could result in further stigmatization and unnecessary retraumatization for youth with incarcerated parents. It is important, especially in under-resourced urban schools to teach about past injustices, so that blame can be appropriately placed, and consequences can be understood (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021). Learning about the true social context of institutions and specifically, the systematic racism that is inherently a part of the criminal justice system, may provide youth with an increased understanding of their family members' and their own struggles, creating a foundation for them to increase their own self-efficacy and paving the way for a successful path to avoid a similar outcome.

4.1.4 | School-based support

Participants mentioned that it could be helpful to communicate with schools about the incarcerated family members so that schools are able to provide or connect the student with the extra support and resources that they may need as they are coping with this transition and loss. School-based supports mentioned by the participants included access to counselors, mentors/coaches, healthy outlets such as sports, free meals, and universal afterschool programming. Schools must also create an environment where families feel safe and supported when providing this type of personal information about their families. Some participants experienced fear of being judged and labeled. While children may need extra support, they also should not be defined by having an incarcerated parent. The ways that certain programs and events are marketed and framed could also be more accommodating for children with incarcerated parents, such as a *Father-Daughter* dance, being clear that this could be inclusive of other role models, mentors, or family members. When it comes to forming groups for children with incarcerated parents, the reframing of the group may also help it to be more effective to prevent stigma. For example, within our research process, we took on a positive framing of a youth leadership team focused on addressing issues related to community safety and wellbeing, with a focus on supporting communities around the issue of incarceration. Creating spaces where children with and without incarcerated parents can come together around the issue could also be beneficial when it comes to increasing the empathy of peers and decreasing stigma as they work toward common goals. For example, creating a school club around social justice issues, which could be inclusive of the issue of incarceration without single out those with incarcerated parents. An additional strategy is to incorporate YPAR as a part of a school curriculum connected to core academic courses such as social studies or social-emotional learning. We are piloting this within our local school districts by offering YPAR as a form of project-based learning, a teaching method in which students learn by actively engaging in real-world and personally meaningful projects, and through offering it as a weekly social and emotional learning curriculum for middle school and high school students. Through these curricula, youth are able to explore pressing social issues, such as incarceration with their peers and develop action plans, recommendations, and adult-stakeholder partnerships.

4.1.5 | Mental health services

Increasing the accessibility of formal mental health services in communities for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals, individuals transitioning from prison, and children and families with incarcerated family members were suggested by the participants. Other participants who did not find counseling to be helpful, accessible, or culturally appropriate mentioned the value of having someone to talk to who understood or shared a similar experience. This did not have to be a formal counselor but could be through informal social networks or mentoring.

4.1.6 | Parent-child communication

The core message for parents from the youth participants was centered around communication. They found it beneficial for parents to communicate honestly and openly with their child, even young children, about the incarcerated family member and to work with the child to develop a plan for engaging with the incarcerated parent. The participants recognized that the circumstances may vary and that safety could be an issue for some children depending on the parents' offense and their relationship with that parent. However, they stressed the need for the nonincarcerated parent or current guardian to recognize that the incarcerated parent is still that child's parent and they may have a strong need and desire to stay connected.

4.1.7 | Criminal justice and policing

In relation to our criminal justice and policing systems, the participants discussed the need for accountability with police officers and for developing better relationships with the community. The participants discussed how it would be beneficial for police to have a stronger community presence at community events and through walking around communities. They also suggested police and communities work together to shift the perception away from police being there to victimize the community (such as through abuses of power and racial targeting/profiling) to instead work with and for the community to achieve a safe and peaceful environment.

4.1.8 | Root causes of incarceration

Policies focused on addressing the root causes of incarceration or high crime rates in communities were also mentioned by the participants as essential solutions to the issue of mass incarceration. For example, investing in building the wealth of Black families and other historically disenfranchised groups. The need for investing in well-paying jobs, and making them accessible to felons was also identified by the youth as a solution. Both of these findings align with the findings of a system dynamics study within Cleveland, Ohio, which identified a focus on interventions aimed at building wealth and well-paying jobs among marginalized populations as a solution to help alleviate poverty while addressing structural inequities related to high incarceration rates (Benninger, Donley, et al., 2021; Benninger, Schmidt-Sane, et al., 2021).

4.2 | Research implications and limitations

The data in this study are exploratory and are not based on a representative sample of COIP or intended to be generalizable to the larger population. They do, however, provide in-depth information regarding the participants'

experiences which illuminate insights that may be overlooked by researchers and practitioners, and which could pave the way for future research, intervention development, and policy. The study contributes in the following ways to the areas of children of incarcerated parents and YPAR:

- (1) We worked alongside COIP to document and understand experiences of having a parent incarcerated from the perspective of the youth, including understanding their unique challenges, but also the ways in which young people flourish in the face of adversity. We used YPAR to accomplish this and to also devise ways to reach this hard-to-reach population with services and other forms of support. We also integrated a form of peer support into our YPAR approach to address issues of trauma, stigma, and shame.
- (2) We involved youth in all stages of the research, from planning to data collection, and analysis. We continue to engage youth in various platforms for dissemination and continued action and reflection. This includes the development of a visual media product that captures the participants' experiences and recommendations for local and national stakeholders along with a collaborative plan for advocacy and action. Not only were research participants involved in all stages of the research, but we have worked with our core youth researchers to plan the project proposal. We co-designed our research objectives, including the definition of research questions with youth. Furthermore, we created a core advisory board that includes young people, adults, and stakeholders to enhance the research and improve linkages between community organizations, policymakers, and youth and to improve the linkage between research and policy change.
- (3) We provided flexibility in the YPAR process. The flexibility in our research process has been the most evident through the COVID-19 pandemic and switching from remote data collection to in-person and back again to remote. We not only provide flexibility for planning but set clear objectives and expectations. We were clear from the outset about what we can do and what we cannot do.
- (4) We see our role as facilitators and promoters of young people's interests. We provided space for young people to simply talk and share their concerns, even if it is not related to the research topic. This has become important through the COVID-19 pandemic when youth expressed a number of anxieties in addition to those related to having an incarcerated parent. We listened and provided space to discuss these anxieties and possible positive coping mechanisms.
- (5) We used novel methodologies to improve our understanding of youth perceptions and perspectives. A key feature of our methodology is participant observation before and during data collection. Participant observation includes spending time in the community, not only for research but for other community organization activities, and taking notes on observations. It allows us to note the context of the research, including youth group norms and actions.

5 | CONCLUSION

Parental incarceration has been listed as an adverse childhood experience, with negative impacts on children's social and emotional wellbeing. Despite experiencing this adversity, many children are able to thrive and flourish as established by the perceptions shared by the youth. Our study utilized a YPAR approach in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, and provided a platform for kids to feel empowered to discuss the mental health effects, social connections and support, universal interventions, avoiding stigma and blame and have a school support system that students can rely on along with increased communication efforts and policies. The participants created a number of recommendations for interventions to better support the needs of children with incarcerated parents. These include interventions that address the root causes of high crime rates in communities (i.e., building wealth for minority families, access to equitable education and jobs, mental health services), universal support at school (i.e., afterschool programming, free lunch, counseling services, and social and emotional learning opportunities), transforming relationships between police and communities (from fearful and punitive relationships to meaningful partnerships),

and increasing opportunities for children to communicate with adults about their experiences and to make decisions regarding their lives and their relationships with incarcerated family members. The evidence from this study can be used to influence the changes in policies and strategies for a positive impact on the COIP and their families to flourish. We view this study as a part of a larger ongoing movement of participation, action, and reflection to support COIP. Therefore, further collaborative interventions and studies must be implemented to understand the youth and their perceptions and to further support youth flourishing.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

PEER REVIEW

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