



# A RADICAL MODEL FOR DECRIMINALIZATION

RESEARCH MODEL & INITIAL FINDINGS

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*Centering the lives of San Francisco  
system-involved women and TGNC people:  
a participatory and decolonizing model.*

BY ALEZANDRA MELENDREZ AND  
YOUNG WOMEN'S FREEDOM CENTER



FREEDOM  
RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABOUT THE YOUNG WOMEN'S FREEDOM CENTER	4
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	5
CONTRIBUTIONS	6
LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR	7
YOUTH RESEARCH TEAM	9
INTRODUCTION	11
MISSION & PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH INSTITUTE	13
ETHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH	14
METHODOLOGY/YPAR	16
OVERVIEW OF FIRST RESEARCH PROJECT	17
METHODS	19
LIFE COURSE INTERVIEW	19
TYPOLOGY OF QUESTION IN LIFE COURSE INTERVIEW	20
OTHER DATA COLLECTION	21
INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS & OUTREACH	22
INTERVIEW PROCESS	23
DATA ANALYSIS	24
WRITING REPORTS & INQUIRY CIRCLES	25
PLANS FOR SHARING FINDINGS	26
RESEARCH FINDINGS	26
INTRODUCTION TO FINDINGS	27
FAMILY	29
HOUSING	32
FOSTER CARE	35
SCHOOL	38
JUVENILE JUSTICE	41
ADULT JUSTICE SYSTEM	44
MAKING MONEY	46
ADVERSE CHILDHOOD SURVEY (ACE)	48
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS	51
WORKS CITED	55

# ABOUT THE YOUNG WOMEN'S FREEDOM CENTER

The Young Women's Freedom Center is a grassroots organizing and leadership non-profit. Over the last 26 years, the YWFC has invested in the leadership of system-involved women, girls, and TGNC people of color in San Francisco. The Center is led by those most impacted so they are uniquely positioned to provide an invaluable source of analysis around best practices for engagement, programming, and policy recommendations. As leaders in the intersecting fields of incarceration and gender issues, they have worked with community members, system stakeholders, practitioners, and policymakers to build more just and equitable communities to directly impact the daily lives of their members.



YOUNG WOMEN'S  
FREEDOM CENTER

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The Positive Youth Justice Initiative helps communities across California transform juvenile justice practice and policy into a more just, effective system that is aligned with the developmental needs of young people. The Positive Youth Justice Initiative is funded by Sierra Health Foundation, The California Endowment, The California Wellness Foundation, and the Zellerbach Family Foundation and is managed by The Center at Sierra Health Foundation ([www.shfcenter.org](http://www.shfcenter.org)).

The views communicated in this report should not be attributed to any of the funders.

The legacy and the current team at the Young Women’s Freedom Center have provided the impetus, inspiration, knowledge base, and critical analysis that the author has infused throughout this study and report. Lastly, this study would not have been possible without the openness, power, and expertise of the women and TGNC people that the research team interviewed.



# CONTRIBUTIONS

During this research study, an array of people have contributed to the development of this project by providing their insight and expertise. A research project of this magnitude is a collective effort. The following people have made significant contributions to the development of this project.

## **Academic advisors**

Dr. Alan Sadovnik, Rutgers University

– Newark

Dr. Carlyne White, Rutgers University

– Newark

Dr. Elizabeth Brown, San Francisco

State University

Dr. Sabrina Chase, Rutgers University

– Newark

## **Content revisions**

Ifasina Clear

Jessica Nowlan

## **Data analysis**

Katie Manbachi

Ryan McMaster

## **Data collection**

Jocelyn Mati

Lillayana Lonzanida

Lucero Herrera

Shai Aikens

## **Design of report and all graphic images**

Ryan McMaster

## **Edited**

Katie Manbachi

## **Facilitation of inquiry focus groups, that contributed to the writing of this report**

Jocelyn Mati

## **Policy recommendations written and developed**

Amika Mota

Ifasina Clear

Jessica Nowlan

Julia Arroyo

Krea Gomez

## **Research design & development**

Lillayana Lonzanida

Lucero Herrera

## **Technical research support**

Dr. Angela Irvine

# LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,

Since 1993, the Young Women's Freedom Center, formerly the Center for Young Women's Development, has operated from the framework that women, girls, and TGNC (Trans and Gender Non-Conforming) people most impacted by injustice have the answers and insights needed to radically transform structures of oppression that perpetuate cycles of poverty, violence, and incarceration. We believe in the experiential and historical authority of our communities as survivors of the war on drugs, life on the streets, incarceration, and pervasive violence at the hands of the carceral state.

Our methodology has been developed over 26 years and the lifetimes and historical, social, and political experiences of the over 38,000 people that have contributed to the development of the Young Women's Freedom Center. It is a radical approach grounded in intersectional feminism and the collective experiences of oppression as people on the margins of society. The organizational model has been highly successful, and it is not easily replicated because of its transformative nature, which mirrors the complexity of our lives as system-involved women, girls, and TGNC people. The work of YWFC is as complex and fluid as our lives and reflects the long history of fighting against social injustices rooted in patriarchy, racism, and capitalism.

We fight for collective justice and liberation. At the same time, we recognize that our work starts by transforming ourselves and our communities first. We build our personal and collective power so that we have the capacity and knowledge to lead the movement to end the oppression and violence of the carceral state.

In our current moment, the issues the YWFC has been working on for years—the war on drugs, mass incarceration, and violence against women and girls—have been given a national platform. This is a result of over 26 years of hard work, pain, and struggles from the ground. Through organizing, grassroots efforts, and research we have made collective progress in shifting the political and cultural narrative. And yet we know that now is the time to deepen this work and push for the inclusion of participatory methods to empower everyday women, girls, and TGNC people to lead critical research.

YWFC is launching the Freedom Research Institute as a core operational part of our work moving forward. The Freedom Research Institute will serve as a collaborative place to deconstruct and decolonize conventional social science research. Academia perpetuates exclusive ownership and access to data about our own communities, the ones we serve every day at the YWFC. As a result, our voices as people on the margins have been historically silenced in spaces that direct funding, programming, and policies around systems reform and abolitionist work. The Freedom Research Institute is grounded in a critical participatory model of learning to situate the inherent knowledge we possess as those most impacted by state systems of punishment, isolation, and violence. As a radical feminist organization, we choose to shift research towards questions of rehabilitation, reintegration, and restoration.

## LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

In our work to decriminalize and decarcerate women, girls, and TGNC people of color, our first research project has developed a comprehensive analysis of the extent to which those on the margins have been criminalized in the context of the rise of mass incarceration over the past 50 years. Locally, our goal with this initial report is to reveal how regional institutions in California create a systemic criminalization of women, girls, and TGNC people of color. More broadly, the report challenges the structure and practices of patriarchy as they are embedded in criminal justice systems, the current economic landscape, and academic research. Beyond our day to day work in California, the Young Women's Freedom Center is actively engaged in a larger political movement that centers the radical imagination and transformative voices of those most marginalized by injustice—women, girls, and TGNC people of color.

Our research explores the complex web of government programs, services, and instruments of surveillance that create barriers to self-determination and result in the criminalization of women. We aim to critically and compassionately approach the economic, emotional, and spiritual burdens that often tear families and communities apart and perpetuate intergenerational cycles of poverty, violence, and incarceration.

Over the next 24-months, the YWFC's Freedom Research Institute will release several reports related to this initial study. Our long-term focus is to expand our collective capacity to use critical, participatory research as a tool for social transformation. We hope this new community-driven knowledge will direct the larger movement of people and organizations working towards the freedom and liberation of all oppressed peoples on both the local and national levels.

Sincerely,

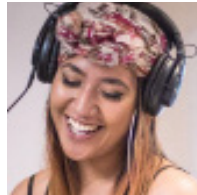
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jessica Nowlan'. The signature is stylized with a large loop at the beginning and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Jessica Nowlan  
Executive Director



# YOUTH RESEARCH TEAM

## Reflections on the importance of community and participatory based research

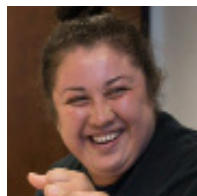


**Jocelyn Mati**  
*Research Organizer*

Young women and girls like me are the most qualified to lead research on system involvement. We are embedded in the justice and foster care systems and hold a lived understanding of the questions. This isn't just paper for us, its life. We didn't collect these stories to turn them into clickbait, we gathered this wisdom to reform the system from within. In this research, over 100 women trusted us to hold secrets they have never shared with anyone else. That's a responsibility. They are not just a statistic, they are a whole person with a life story. With us in the room with them, they were able to acknowledge their past, not as a confession of guilt, but as a narrative that could turn their struggle and trauma into strength.

If my sister who I've known since birth, who has been locked up with me, who has seen the worst with me, can then see me do research, that will inspire her and our entire community. It shows that in holding space for community stories, we uphold our responsibility to empower ourselves in the fight for liberation. We are more than just "criminals on record." We can record our own stories. Research is a tool for us to be heard and for us to organize our shared struggles.

When the most marginalized communities are able to use research as a tool, then we can put these stories together and it frees us all.



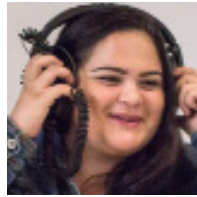
**Lucero Herrera**  
*Lead Research Organizer*

Young women like us who have worked in the underground street economy and have been formerly incarcerated are the most marginalized. The systems lock us away from living our true selves. We are the experts on how these systems work. For this reason, we are the only ones who have the skills necessary to change how our story is told. Systems tell us our that our lives and our stories are not important. When we conduct research, we confront the systems that have separated us and scared us into staying silent and not speaking the truth. When you have someone working with you to fight the system right next to you, it makes the struggle against injustice more powerful.

For the women involved in this study to be comfortable, they needed someone who understands them and could relate to what they have experienced. The majority of the

women on our research team have had similar life experiences as the people who we interviewed and this made it easier for them to tell their stories, especially when they shared about personal trauma and violence in systems. When you have someone from your community doing the research, who has gone through what you have gone through, it makes the research better. We were able to build closer relationships with them to let them know what happened to them was oppression. We let the women know we are going to work together to end this trauma for the next generation of young women and girls.

This research has the power to change the narratives that the systems create about us. Once marginalized women and girls start to understand the structural problems they face, they can contextualize their story. Then, they can start to understand that we are not the problem, the trauma and challenges we face are caused by systems. We need to reform the system to help support our rehabilitation and healing, not continue to punish us.



**Lillyana Lonzanida**

*Former Research Organizer, Current Active Member*

This project helped me realize that community-based research can create opportunities for personal and collective growth. My experience of homelessness and isolation as a former foster kid was not only a personal, but a communal experience. When women of color share their stories, research becomes more

than just data collection. We are on the front lines, every day, living out the experiences of system involvement. We are the ones who have been in foster care, who have been incarcerated, and who have had to fight for food and medical care for our babies. We ask different questions because we have a practical knowledge of the law and how it impacts our communities. Our experiences with foster care and juvenile justice have the power to call out unfair and unjust practices and identify which communities need more resources in California. We need more research like this, so that the most vulnerable communities can receive the support and resources necessary to live fuller lives.



**Shai Aikens**

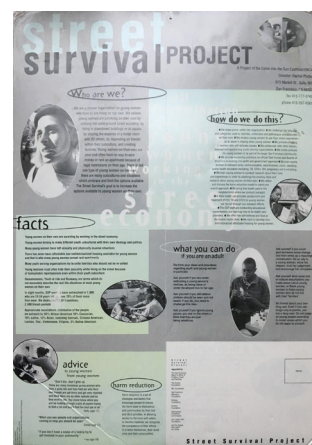
*Former Self Determination Coordinator, Current Active Member*

At the Young Women’s Freedom Center, we know first-hand how hard it is to be on the streets or to be misunderstood by the system and people in power. Our voices have been silenced for generations. When women of color do research, they bring with

them the voices of past slaves, sex workers, and all of the women and girls who are our ancestors. Those who participated in the study were more open to sharing their lives with us because we have also experienced the seclusion and helplessness that comes from being incarcerated or destabilized by trauma. The women were inspired by our work to keep fighting for their dreams of security and safety, and hearing women’s stories gave us the motivation to work harder to free ourselves and other young women from systems of oppression. Our stories, real and raw, are going to be at the forefront of the fight to decriminalize our youth. Our understanding and wisdom are going to be at the center of the struggle to transform systems that are no longer serving us. Our stories are finally going to be free.

# INTRODUCTION

The Young Women's Freedom Center has spent the last 26 years working with the most marginalized women, girls, and TGNC people who are impacted by the corrosive effects of incarceration, poverty, and violence. In 1993, a group of intergenerational women worked together in the Street Survival Project to address the immediate needs that arose from the early 1990's crack and AIDS epidemic that devastated communities of poor, working-class people of color. The Center became the first youth-led organization in the country with nineteen-year-old executive director Lateefah Simon, and it continues to be guided by the power and expertise of young people. As the Center grew in size and capacity, under the leadership of Marlene Sanchez, the work expanded to encompass leadership training inside of detention centers and within the community, as well as organizing to transform local and state policy and practice.



Poster for the Street Survival Project

## SYSTEM-INVOLVED

Traditionally, the Center has referred to the population of people that they work with as formerly incarcerated or having worked in the underground street economy, although the women, girls, and TGNC people that have been a part of the Center have had different life experiences that did not always fall into those 2 neat categories. The thread that tied all the people that have been a part of the Center together are their experiences of oppression and inequality through governmental and institutional systems. The Center is taking on a more expansive view of what constitutes incarceration, and they are looking at all the factors that contribute to the construction of the American carceral state. This shift in language allows for a more inclusive term that encapsulates the experiences of poor working-class people of color and the barriers they face in their daily lives. The concept of system-involved will allow for more effective solutions to arise that adequately address all aspects of people's lives when they experience surveillance and control that limit individual opportunities to lead self-determined lives.

### DEFINITION OF SYSTEM-INVOLVED

The Young Women's Freedom Center defines system-involved the following way:

Systems are defined as any government entity, organization, or network that participates in criminalizing and controlling women and girls. This includes but is not limited to: the Criminal Justice System, the Juvenile Justice System, Foster Care, Child Protective Services, Welfare, mental health institutions, social service providers, subsidized housing programs, and addiction treatment centers.

The Center is grounded in the understanding that those most impacted are best positioned to guide the work of the YWFC and to transform the world. This unique model of leadership facilitates having system-impacted people of color develop strategies from the ground up to work towards the collective freedom of all communities. While phenomenal executive directors have led the Center, the driving heart of the organization is the legacy of the women, girls, and TGNC people that have built this grassroots community. The young people involved in programming or employed through internships are provided with leadership training and mentorship. As a result, while they are building their power, efficacy, and voice, they can also develop the skills necessary to engage in movement building work. The leadership model provides people with opportunities to learn alongside their elders, to show up as they are, and to develop and grow personally, spiritually, and professionally at an individualized pace. The young women and TGNC youth that have benefited from being part of the Center's community of over 500 alumni have been recognized for their brilliance while bringing their full selves to the work so that they build skills from a place of power. This particular model of leadership development removes barriers that many people face when growing up in economically and racially segregated communities where access to quality education and economically viable employment are scarce. New types of leaders emerge who would have typically been excluded



Young Women's Freedom Center

because they may not have had a long history of formal education. Today, Jessica Nowlan and Krea Gomez are on the senior leadership team and were two of the first young people hired in 1993. Their early experiences at the Center contributed to the powerful leadership that they developed over the years and to the transformative work that they are engaged with now.

26 years later, the YWFC is at a pivotal organizational transition, expanding geographically across California, engaging in national movements to end incarceration for women and girls, and developing a comprehensive legislative platform to transform oppressive systems and policies. In the past decade, the demographic landscape of San Francisco has drastically changed, and the YWFC has continually worked to shift its strategies to ensure that those most impacted by injustice are provided with the support and opportunities that they need to thrive. The YWFC is uniquely positioned to delve into the everyday problems faced by their constituency and generate unique solutions to foster a more inclusive city and an environment for diverse people to thrive and lead self-determined lives. As the YWFC enters into a new phase of work in a city in flux, cutting-edge strategies and tools are required. The YWFC leadership called for a body of research that would explore the current issues that system-involved women, girls, and TGNC people of color faced in San Francisco, and decided to develop an internal research department that would be guided by the same principles and methodologies of the Center. At the beginning of 2017, under the leadership of Jessica Nowlan, she hired four new staff members that would focus exclusively on Youth Participatory Action Research, including three young people and one adult researcher. The YWFC partnered with many researchers throughout their tenor and generated meaningful projects, but having an internal research department where knowledge is produced by those most impacted is a different call to action.

In the spring of 2017, the research team began collecting comprehensive life course interviews of 100 system-involved women and TGNC people. Currently, the team is analyzing and writing up the findings, of which this summary is the first in a series of reports that will be released through 2019 and 2020. The research team will intentionally share the findings through traditional reports, as well as media and artistic mediums so that the work can be accessible to diverse audiences. The research team is quickly growing, and several new projects are on the horizon, along with new partners, scholars, and community collaborators from across the country.



A system in America is a state which controls the norms of a society. A system is not having an ability to be creative and authentic. A system is a form of violence.

Definition of System-Involved from a research participant that is rooted in their lived experience

DEFINITION OF TRANSGENDER, GENDER NON-CONFORMING

TGNC

T = Transgender may be used to describe a person's gender identity that is different than the sex that was assigned at birth.

GNC = Gender non-conforming describes someone whose gender identity and/or expression breaks societal norms. A GNC person may claim both genders or identify with being gender free.



YWFC has the responsibility of honoring and holding the specific needs of the young people that are not typically thought of not only in research but in any institution and system. We work from a "gender specific" lens with an understanding that gender is not binary and that non-binary women and girls are criminalized, along with trans women and girls and GNC folks that are often assigned female at birth, yet move in the world with a deviated gender identity and expression.

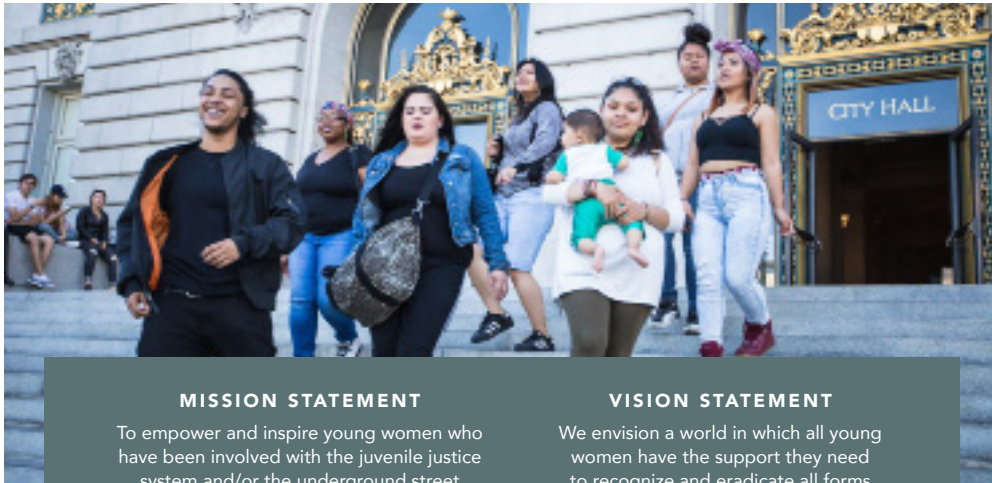
— Ifasina Clear



I identify as gender non-conforming. I don't identify to social norms. I don't claim either gender. Deeply in my heart, I believe I'm two-spirited. I got the best of both worlds. I got male traits and women traits. This is the spiritual piece. I can talk to a group of men and like "Wassup bro? You feel me?" Then I can relate to all the sisters. You hear what I'm saying? That's why I claim I'm gender non-conforming.

Response from a participant on why they identify as gender non-conforming when asked to describe their gender identity as part of the life course survey

# MISSION AND PURPOSE OF THE FREEDOM RESEARCH INSTITUTE



## MISSION STATEMENT

To empower and inspire young women who have been involved with the juvenile justice system and/or the underground street economy to create positive change in their lives and communities.

## VISION STATEMENT

We envision a world in which all young women have the support they need to recognize and eradicate all forms of oppression, to heal, and to live self-determined lives.

The YWFC, a grassroots youth-led community organization, is uniquely positioned to engage in a model of research that confronts dominant modes of oppression and to create radical possibilities for building new communities. The team's shared goal is to use research and the knowledge that it produces as a transgressive tool for socio-political transformation, one that extends far beyond measured reform. At every juncture of the

process, the team will rethink and undo dominant epistemologies and methods to reformulate a way of conducting research so that it is rooted in feminist, queer, and indigenous practices to honor the lineage of their ancestors' expertise. As a collective of intergenerational researchers, they are re-appropriating research proper into a community-based, collaborative inquiry. Their purpose is to incite action and articulate a new collective understanding of who system-involved women, girls, and TGNC people are. At a personal level, the team hopes that participation in the research journey will facilitate collective healing of marginalized communities that have been traditionally ignored and forgotten.

## Goals of the Institute

- Produce knowledge by those most impacted.
- Shift the narrative on who can be considered an expert.
- Work with system stakeholders to directly influence policy and practice.
- Use findings to support organizing and advocacy work of community-based organizations.
- Bring together researchers from diverse backgrounds to work in collaborative teams.
- Address traditional power dynamics by questioning knowledge production and the purpose of research.



We need to shift the narrative on who can be considered an expert. That's part of decolonizing research, and who actually needs to be doing and leading research, you know? So, I think that's really a unique piece about our institute. I think about our research team, how you got us, and how you're doing the writing.

A group of participants were asked to gather in an inquiry circle to revise and edit this report, so that they would have a say as to what would be represented in this report. A participant is reacting to reading the goals of the Institute.



# ETHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH

At its best, research can be used as a powerful tool to delve deep into the complexities of the world we all inhabit and to approximate solutions and understandings that move our collective consciousness forward as we work towards creating more inclusive, productive, and humanistic ways of living. In the early and mid-twentieth century, researchers engaged in ethically violative studies, such as the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study and the Tearoom Trade Study. During this time, there was not an adopted standard of practice for researching human subjects. As a result, researchers often studied marginalized populations under dubious and harmful conditions. After a confluence of incidents, activism, and the Civil Rights Movement, the United States' Federal government passed the National Research Act of 1974. In 1991, it was expanded with the Protection of Human Subjects, which provided the foundation for the creation of the Internal Review Board.



We get shamed for our stories and stuff like that, kept quiet. Acknowledge us, acknowledge everything that comes with us. Everything, I'm not your statistic, I'm not your number. I am a person and I come with everything.

Participant reaction to reading the Ethical Framework

## Ethical Framework

- Research investigators will reflect the community asked to contribute to the project, the participants. Research investigators will be local and share common life experiences and racial, economic, and SOGIE backgrounds. The research investigators will guide the entire project from designing protocols to publishing findings.
- During an interview process (or any qualitative data collection process), the participants will be continually asked for consent to proceed, especially in regards to private information that may be re-triggering to share. The emotional state of the participants is the primary concern, not collecting data.
- Research participants will be treated like professional experts. They will be well-paid, and provided with transportation and childcare when needed.
- At the end of an interview, upon request, services and programming information will be provided to the participant that are available in the local community. The interviewee can utilize the research investigator's expertise navigating local systems.
- A group of participants will review findings and written documents related to the project so that they have oversight into how researchers will represent them publicly.
- Researchers will use multiple mediums to represent research findings that will be accessible to a wide range of audiences.
- Researchers will work to create nuanced and complex understandings of the participant's lives that are not reductive or static and speak to the power and resilience of the participants.
- The impetus for research projects will be to use research as a tool for social transformation that addresses oppressive systems and uncovers new possibilities, not solely for intellectual inquiry.



We're looking at how we know things and saying, wait a minute, we wanna do this differently.

Participant reaction to reading the Ethical Framework



I thought I was giving good feedback to better the community. One of the cons was, when I experienced that, they never followed up with me. I didn't know where that research went.

Participant reaction to reading the Ethical Framework

All members of the YWFC's team are co-investigators on the IRB application for this research project, and they completed training and certification to be co-collaborators with their adult allies. As the team designed the IRB research protocols, they uncovered other ethical concerns that they wanted to address that were not required by the IRB. The youth researchers had their own experiences with being "researched" that had felt extractive, and they were compelled to design a different experience for the system-involved people that they would interview. The 100 participants that the team interviewed were recruited from the local community and included friends and family with whom the team may have shared seminal life moments.

The interviewees were the research team's Center siblings, not research subjects. This created a fundamentally different orientation and commitment to the process. The research team developed an ethical framework for conducting research that was worked out, practiced, and revised throughout the nine months of data collection.



We got compensated for our time. Not only are we creating space for healing, but also our time is being compensated. We're not all here for free. I feel like that's very important. A lot of times people get all this research and data but they give nothing back to the youth.

Participants reaction to reading the Ethical Framework

## Reactions from Inquiry Circles

The youth researchers and the participants had many experiences of being "researched." They described researchers coming into their neighborhoods and schools to get them to participate in studies, but not being clear on the purpose of the studies and not being treated well. Specifically, they felt that they were underpaid. The participants said that they were treated differently in this project, and they appreciated that a community member was in the interview and that the interviews were held in community spaces. The participants discussed feeling respected because they were well-paid, offered food, transportation, and childcare. Many of the participants would thank the interviewers at the end because they felt acknowledged and heard in a non-judgmental space.

### DEFINITION OF SOGIE

**SO = Sexual orientation** is a description of who a person is sexually attracted to. A person may be attracted to someone of the opposite gender, same gender, or people of more than one gender. Some people are not sexually attracted to anyone.

**GI = Gender identity** is how a person describes how they internally experience their gender.

**GE = Gender Expression** is how a person embodies their gender externally and how they represent themselves socially.

# METHODOLOGY/YPAR

In keeping with the YWFC's guiding principles, the research team's core methodologies are rooted in practices that are participatory, decolonizing, and question the Western traditions of knowledge making. Instead, the team is committed to research that is produced by those most impacted and serves as a tool for social transformation. The YWFC's research team situates themselves among progressive scholars that have been inspired by a wide range of social movements, from the Civil Rights to Paulo Freire, and have used these liberatory practices to reconstruct the academic knowledge-making machine. It was only natural that the projects to come out of the YWFC would engage in Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) methodologies. YPAR draws from the fields of Positive Youth Development and Critical Youth Studies with attention to a strength-based model of working with young people that focuses on the development of their agency and voice; all principals that are core to the work of the YWFC<sup>1</sup>.

YPAR is a methodology that diverse scholars engage in and common features across disciplines include the centrality of youth voice, a topic that addresses a social justice issue, and an intentional action agenda. Adult allies and academic researchers offer an educational and inquiry space where they train youth in research methods and then act as facilitators throughout the project<sup>2</sup>. In the YPAR research setting, youth are co-collaborators and not the subject of research. They are the producers of knowledge alongside the adult researchers<sup>3</sup>. Youth researchers critically engage in social issues that they define and construct themselves and are often derived directly from their lived experiences<sup>4</sup>. In this way, YPAR becomes a pedagogical tool for the research team to examine social inequalities in their own lives or their communities<sup>5</sup>. YPAR research teams are committed to social justice values and intentionally plan to have the results of their labor contribute towards community transformation<sup>6</sup>. As youth critically produce knowledge about themselves and their communities, they become part of the vehicle for social justice transformation as they shift the conception of who can be considered an expert<sup>7</sup>. The YWFC's current research project and future endeavors will continue to incorporate YPAR methodology, as it seeks to redefine the field.



## YWFC GUIDING PRINCIPLE

Below is one the guiding principles from the Young Women's Freedom Center. The Freedom Research Institute has developed within this organization and so they are incorporating the Center's principles and methodologies into how they will conduct research.

*Young women, girls, and TGNC people are fierce and powerful experts, leaders, and partners in all of our work.*

*We believe that young people of color, young people living in poverty, young mothers, trans young women, gender non-conforming young people, and queer young women are best positioned to inform, guide, and manage the development of YWFC and to transform the world.*

## Engaged scholarship

The researchers in this study are influenced by the academic conversations around Engaged Public Scholarship. In EPS, Scholars and community members work as co-investigators, and the goal of their research is to shape the social world directly. Alejandra Melendrez, Director of Research at the YWFC, has received academic advisement from scholars at Rutgers University Newark and San Francisco State University.



This program is good because they come to the jails and stuff, so I think anybody would have felt comfortable because we all know them from jail. But you know what the Center's about, so you already know it's going to be good. You explained it to me on the phone, so I was like, 'Okay.' But if it was at a university or something, I wouldn't feel like they was trying to ... you know what I'm saying? Get my information or something. It would have been kind of weird.

A participant highlights what it was like to be part of a research project that took place at the Young Women's Freedom Center

YOUNG WOMEN'S  
FREEDOM CENTER

RUTGERS

SAN FRANCISCO  
STATE UNIVERSITY



# OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH PROJECT



Historically, the Center has been located in San Francisco to meet the needs of system-involved women, girls, and TGNC people living in the surrounding communities. More recently, our programming data reveals that our members are coming from outside of the city. As a result, it has been more challenging to recruit and perform outreach to new people locally that have been impacted by incarceration. Youth employees and participants travel regularly to the Center's office from Solano County, Alameda County, and San Joaquin County. If you were to only look at the decrease in young people detained in Juvenile Hall over the last decade, you would see an overall continued decline, but it would be misguided to conclude that social and economic issues that young, poor people of color face have disappeared. Poor working-class families of color are being displaced across the Bay Area further and further from the city center. They have experienced what Dr. Fullilove, a research psychiatrist at Columbia, has termed Root Shock: "the traumatic stress reaction to the destruction of all or part of one's emotional ecosystem,"<sup>8</sup>. The confluence of social, economic, and political transformations in San Francisco since the early 1990s has created a vastly different city with new challenges for system-involved women, girls, and TGNC people to navigate.

The landscape of juvenile incarceration has changed in San Francisco since the height of incarceration in the early 1990s during the early years of the YWFC. In 2017, there were a total of 84 girls detained in juvenile hall in San Francisco<sup>9</sup>. In the same year, duplicated referrals for boys and girls saw a decline of -19% since 2013<sup>10</sup>. San Francisco's juvenile justice system has seen less overall involvement at every point of the system, but there are significant racial and ethnic disparities in the youth who are referred, incarcerated, and otherwise monitored by the court system. In 2013, Black people made up 6% of San Francisco's population, yet 56% of the total incarcerated population<sup>11</sup>. San Francisco's juvenile hall had a total of 120 duplicated bookings for the year with 43.3% of the girls staying between 1 - 9 days. Of the detained girls, 58.33% were Black and 26.19% were Hispanic, with every other racial category under 5%. 29.76% of the young women lived in Bayview Hunter's Point, a predominantly Black neighborhood<sup>12</sup>. The YWFC is well versed in the daily counts of the female detention centers, as they teach inside and engage with women as they re-enter their community. The community at the YWFC also knows that members are still confronting severe issues in their lives that hinder the development of self-determined futures.

As the YWFC has continued to invest in the leadership of system-involved women, girls, and TGNC people in San Francisco, they have been witness to the local and specific complexities that their members must negotiate on a daily basis as they seek employment, look for housing, and build their families in a city that has undergone massive changes in the last decade. The demographic population has experienced shifts, with Black residents accounting for 5.7% of the overall population, while the national average is 13.3%<sup>13</sup>. San Francisco has the lowest youth population in the country with only 13.4% of its population being persons under 18 years of age, compared to 22.9% nationally<sup>14</sup>. The Black, Latinx, and other communities of color are facing increasing economic and political marginalization. San Francisco has the highest rent gap in the country; and this is the difference between market-rate housing and what long-term residents pay for their housing<sup>15</sup>. In the past five years, San Francisco's rental market has experienced a 54.7% increase in evictions, and many of these have taken place in neighborhoods where Black and Latinx resident communities are rooted, such as the Fillmore District and the Mission<sup>16</sup>. Long-time residents of San Francisco and their families are facing a city that is no longer meeting their needs. Researchers have studied the mechanisms of gentrification for many years now<sup>17</sup>. What is less studied, is how are the people who are left surviving? San Francisco is a global city where economic stratification is among the highest in the country, so the exploration of how disparate communities coexist in one geographical space is a new and provocative topic for scholars to investigate. It is within this context that the YPAR research team has formulated their first research endeavor.

At the beginning of 2017, the YWFC was awarded a grant that sought to build a healthier and more just juvenile justice system through building collective partnerships with youth and community partners across California. In March 2017, a youth research team and adult researcher came together to collaborate on their first project. The team went through 4 months of training in research methods before delving into the specificity of the project. In the initial phases, the team read through relevant academic literature and met with systems stakeholders and long-time researchers in the girls and justice space. This provided a foundation for understanding how the team would articulate the issues facing system-involved women, girls, and TGNC people.

The next step for the team would be to decide what the project would look like, with the only limitation being that they explore the intersection of incarceration and gender. The youth researchers spent several sessions writing every potential question that they would want to ask as a system-involved young person. The team then began categorizing the questions into a coherent protocol, and this process in and of itself revealed an important finding. As the youth researchers began to articulate what core issues system-involved young people face, their analysis moved towards understanding the entanglements they experienced across multiple institutional systems. It became impossible to isolate incarceration from other systems such as housing, school, or healthcare. From a grounded theory approach, the youth researchers came to understand the juvenile justice system from an ecological lens. Any young person is rooted and developed in the community in which they grow up. To understand who they are and what possibilities will lay ahead, a holistic examination of multiple systems and communities that surround them is necessary. What often happens in the narrative of incarceration is that people look towards isolated incidents attributed to an offender, instead of looking at the community that made this act possible. The team wanted to create a nuanced bricolage of who system-involved people are and the issues they face, as well as the possibility for creating

self-determined futures. With all this in mind, the team came to the following research question that would guide the project:

## Research Questions

How do women, girls, and TGNC transitional age (18 – 29 years old) people navigate multiple governmental systems: housing, healthcare, judicial, and the job market to create self-determined futures?

- How are they surviving the current political, economic, and social climate of San Francisco?
- How do they experience the entanglement of being part of multiple institutional systems?
- How do these multiple systems work with and against women as they navigate their lives?
- How do cis and trans system-involved women re-imagine justice and social and economic transformation for themselves and their communities?

## Methods

Alezandra Melendrez, the Research Director, began training 3 youth research organizers in March 2017. The research team spent 3 months training in general research methods, approximately 8 hours a week. Alezandra adapted a research methods course that she was teaching in the Criminal Studies department at San Francisco State University for a community setting. The team spent a considerable amount of time in the development phase. They explored the issues facing system-involved women, girls, and TGNC people in San Francisco as they began to give shape to their research project. The research team interviewed people in the juvenile system in San Francisco, criminal justice researchers, and practitioners. They also attended girls court regularly. During this same time, the research team engaged in course work around the institutional and historical treatment of people as human subjects, and everyone obtained collaborative institutional training certification. This allowed for all members of the intergenerational team to be co-investigators on the study. During August and September 2017, the team finalized the research design and submitted their IRB application. The researchers began recruitment and interviewing in October 2017 and completed 100 interviews by July 2018.

## Life Course Interview

The interview protocols that the research team developed took on a life course framework. The team wanted to explore how systems have impacted people lives. They knew that to understand how the justice system and foster care system affected people's lives that they would need to situate each person within a fuller context. The youth researchers had

the visceral understanding of the entanglements that people experience as they navigate multiple institutional systems. They experienced making complex negotiations on a daily basis, for situations that most people would consider mundane, such as finding housing, food or childcare. The research team wanted to collect rich life histories of the participants that they would interview while gathering the necessary systems data. The team's goal was to enable the YWFC to use the research as a tool for engaging in local and statewide organizing, advocacy, and policy work.

The life course interview is mixed-methods; the protocol is formatted to be a blend of quantitative survey questions and more open-ended, qualitative questions. The team used the survey questions to gather an understanding of how the participants moved through different institutional systems and their communities. The structure and pacing of the protocols were used as a guide for the participants to move through various aspects of their lives, and they were encouraged to add any narrative details to contextualize their experiences. For example, a participant may have reported that they were suspended six times from middle school. A purely quantitative survey may miss that the same young person was defending themselves against peers bullying them for being gender non-conforming and that their family was living at the homeless shelter at the time after being evicted from their long time family home. The life course interview has 336 total questions and appears to follow more of a survey format, but the tenor of the interview was more akin to a guided oral history. The youth interviewers were trained to make the interview conversational and allow for the participant to guide the pacing and focus of the two hours. An essential aspect of this process was for each participant to construct a narrative about their lives and experiences that sits outside of the stereotypical assumptions of who system-involved people are, and how they negotiated unjust systems and social constructs with grace, power, and dignity.

## Sections of Life Course Interview

*\*Denote sections that only those interviewees who had that experience would answer. For example, if a person was not in foster care they would skip that section of questions.*

- Demographic information
- Housing history
- Family background
- Foster Care \*
- School (Elementary - Post secondary)
- Juvenile Justice System (cases, court, incarceration)\*
- Adult Justice System (cases, court, incarceration) \*
- Probation/Parole\*
- Re-Entry\*
- Healthcare/Mental health
- Making Money
- Motherhood
- Community Violence
- ACE survey

## Typology of Questions in Life Course Interview

In each section of the interview, the following types of questions were asked in each section.

TYPE OF QUESTION	RATIONAL/DESCRIPTION
General experience	Generally, understand how people are moving through aspects of their lives or systems. When asking about the justice system, participants were asked to detail each case they were convicted of and share their convicted charges, final sentence, and if they made bail.
Pathway/risk questions	Each section contained questions that were included based on existing bodies of research that are relevant for assessing risk. Participants were asked about the school disciplinary data because of the research around the School-to-Prison-Pipeline. Participants were asked questions about incidents in systems that were violations of their safety, such as extended time in solitary confinement or sexual harassment by systems service providers.
Connectedness & trust to service providers	Determining if participants were able to connect with and make use of their service providers, such as social workers, public defenders, or teachers. In addition, participants evaluated the service provider's performance. Examples: If something was going on at school, was there an adult you trusted that you could go to? Did you feel like your public defender was fighting with you to defend your case?
Familial/Friend support	Assessing the level of kinship support participants had in particular systems. For example, did their guardians support them with school work or visit them while they were incarcerated.
Policy/System recommendations	At the end of each section, participants were asked to reflect on the system and detail what worked, what was a struggle, and what support they believed would have made a difference. In addition, they provided policy and practice recommendations.

## Other Data Collection

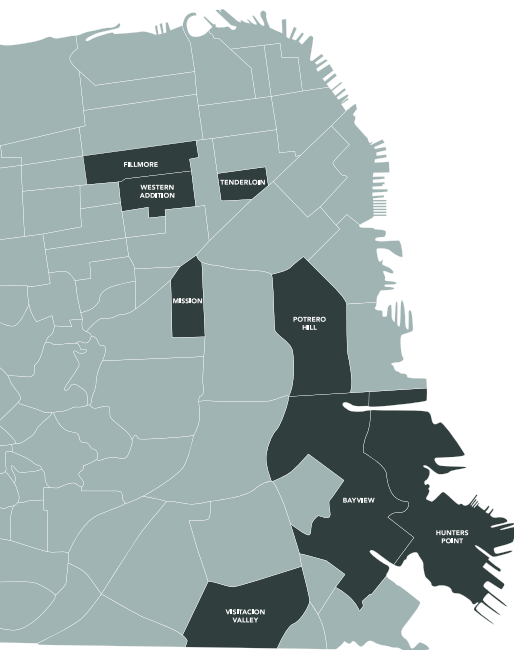
The bulk of the data that the research team collected was the 100 life course interviews. The team collected additional data to provide the local city context, and the team took field notes during the data collection process.

- 1 ½ years of ethnographic field notes, collected by Alezandra Melendrez.
- 10 - 20-minute video sessions that served as field notes for the youth researchers.
- Interviews with system practitioners and stakeholders in foster care, juvenile justice, adult justice, and housing.
- System city level data in the juvenile justice system, adult justice system, and foster care.

## Interview Participants & Outreach

The research team interviewed 100 women and TGNC people. The participants needed to meet the following qualifications to be interviewed.

- Self identifies as a woman, girl, or trans women or trans masculine (not be confused with a trans man) and GNC (assigned female at birth).
- Falls between the age of 18 – 29.
- Grew up in San Francisco or currently lives here.
- Has at least 1 of the 3 following life experiences:
  - In the foster care system.
  - In the juvenile justice system.
  - In the adult justice system.



The youth researchers engaged in a variety of strategies for outreach to potential participants that utilized their connections to the local community. The first round of interviews were with people in current programming at the YWFC, or with friends, family, or active YWFC members. Once the team exhausted their immediate networks, they distributed flyers to San Francisco community-based non-profits, but this resulted in a low number of referrals. Lucero Herrera, the lead YPAR researcher, strategized innovative ways to meet potential participants in the community using her local and insider knowledge. Lucero led the team in identifying specific locations in communities of color in San Francisco where system-involved people of color work or hang out, and the team would spend considerable time conducting street outreach. The youth team posted flyers at housing projects, single room occupancy (SRO), hotels, health centers, and in the back of buses in Bayview, Hunter’s Point, Fillmore, Visitacion Valley, and the Tenderloin. At times, the team would sit for long periods at bus stops, community colleges, nail shops, or corner stores with large signs and flyers. The youth research team also used social media messaging and closed groups to reach potential participants. The team was able to reach women and TGNC people that traditional

researchers cannot access. As a consequence, the team interviewed people that were living on the social and economic margins of San Francisco, some of whom were on the run from the justice system or were undocumented.

## Interview Process

The youth researchers made sure to fully disclose what the interviews would be like and what the purpose of the study was before scheduling people to come in for interviews. The team provided the women and TGNC people with full transparency of the process and study goals, so only people ready to share their personal stories and system histories participated. When scheduling, the researchers asked if people would need child care during the interview or transportation support through ride-sharing apps. All participants received a \$75 gift card for their contribution to the project. When the participants arrived, the interviewers asked if they wanted tea, coffee, or snacks. The interviews all took place in private rooms to ensure confidentiality. The participants were treated like professionals providing their expertise.

The team's primary concern was making sure that the women and TGNC people that came in were comfortable and well taken care of. The youth researchers are San Francisco natives and had experiences with being system-involved. This added an essential layer of trust for the interviewees. One participant remarked, "Yeah, I felt comfortable because she was there. I'm being honest, I would have never even said any of that if she [Jocelyn] wasn't there."

The interviews took place at the Young Women's Freedom Center office and a month and half of interviews were conducted at the 5-Keys office located at the City College campus in the Bayview neighborhood. These are familiar community spaces for system-involved people of color. During the course of the interview some people were triggered, and the researchers provided a break and emotional support. There were many times when the youth researchers spent time with the participants afterward to debrief and clear energy through healing practices. The team ended the interview with questions about dreams and future goals to wrap up the in-depth process productively and positively.

## Data Analysis

Aleandra will be training the YPAR team in qualitative data analysis. The entire team will analyze the interview transcripts and will use Dedoose, an online software for collaborative mixed methods analysis. The youth researchers are provided with a learning and training space to acquire new skills, and this is an essential aspect of the YPAR and leadership model at the YWFC. Part of the youth team has already capitalized on their research background to obtain improved financial security; they have been hired to perform data analysis for another research project through Boston University. Aleandra, along with hired data scientists, will analyze the quantitative data.



Important that we acknowledge that they were hurting at that moment and they need some space. 'Is there any way we can do, some breathing techniques or some sage?' Or leave them with a positive quote or affirmation at the end of the day so not to leave hurt. Because people tend to hurt people by their telling their story and just leaving them like that.

**Lucero Herra**  
Lead YPAR Researcher

Lucero has experience facilitating space for system-involved women, girls, and TGNC people inside of detention and at the Center. She also practices personal methods of healing that are rooted in her cultural background. Lucero describes how she would handle participants if they were emotionally overwhelmed.



## Writing Reports & Inquiry Circles

Researchers have a big task at hand when they write the results of data that is the accumulation of the intimate details of people’s lives. Researchers must carry the gravity of what it means to represent people to large audiences and must be particularly careful when writing about the experiences of marginalized people, so as not to add to common tropes or contribute to harmful practices. The written word is permanent and static and can be amiss for the more delicate details of living, for what makes us all human. Research reports do not reveal the smiles and laughs exchanged between researchers and participants or the remarkable feats of courage it takes to confide deep personal and historical trauma to strangers. The research team at the YWFC pledges to do their best when writing about the lives of the 100 women and TGNC people that they interviewed and to represent their stories with the grace and power that they themselves have lived their lives.

The research team has stayed in contact with some of the research participants that they interviewed so that the participants would be able to review all written documents from this research study. The participants will have full control of the language and content of all the reports and will provide feedback before the writing is publically shared. The team will follow this process for all written documents that come out of this research project. The participants have been called into 2 focus groups for this paper to develop the ideas and to revise and edit this document.

Moving forward, the research team will host inquiry circles for participants to review analyzed data and provide direction for the written reports and articles. Participants will also be called in to revise final drafts of all written documents. In classic research, these sessions could be called focus groups, but that would imply that the traditional power dynamics between “researchers” and “subjects” are present. Instead, participants are being asked to contribute to the production of knowledge as experts and transformative intellectuals. The research team is dedicated to these procedures. Even though it requires more time and cost, the written reports cannot be perfect representations of the fullness of the people interviewed, and at a minimum the process is collaborative and transparent.

The research team has committed to continuing to engage the participants of this study, and this has required that they maintain contact with participants and can provide additional paid opportunities to engage with the work.

## Plans for Sharing Findings

The research team will be writing traditional research reports that will be published on the YWFC’s website, in addition to submitting articles to academic journals. Of course, scholarly publications are not accessible to a wide audience, simply because this is not how people consume information in the twenty-first century. The researchers will be using the interview transcripts to produce artistic representations of the findings that will appeal

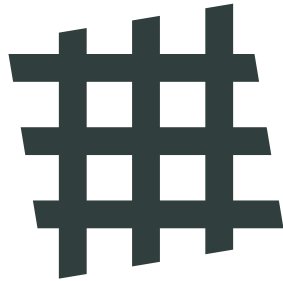


When I was in juvenile hall and I did a research project, they never followed up and then later on down the line when I was already there for six months I’m like, ‘Wait, are they going to use this story to convict me in court? Or are they going to use this for evidence?’ I felt, like they were going to use it in my case because they never followed up with me. Especially when you’re locked up, people that are researchers tend to come in there and use your story and never say good things about you.

A participant describes what it felt like when they were part of a previous project and never heard about what the researchers did with her interview.



to a broader national audience through media platforms. A differentiating feature of the team's publishing plan is that they will be reaching out to all the women and TGNC people that they interviewed to share the results of the project through a community event. The result of this project belongs foremost to the community of system-involved women and TGNC people of color who shared their life histories with the YWFC researchers.



# **FINDINGS**

# INTRODUCTION

The research team is presenting initial findings from the life course interview. They have provided initial descriptive statistics from the survey they collected. The sections of the findings correspond to the different sections of the life course interview. They have also included a qualitative narrative that is a composite story of 3 participants with similar demographic backgrounds, and this is done to preserve the confidentiality of their participants. The research team will be spending the next 24 months continuing to analyze the data and create a nuanced story of the entanglement that system-involved people face as they navigate multiple institutional systems, with a goal of using this work for to advocate for local and statewide policy reform.



## RASHIDA'S STORY

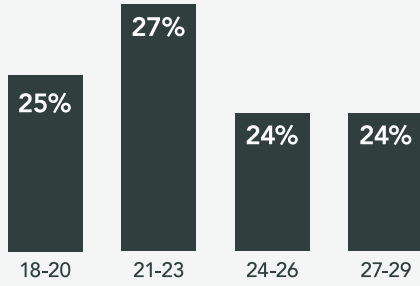
Rashida Greene is a 23-year-old African American young person with a vibrant and easy-going personality. Rashida is a San Francisco native whose family has been deeply rooted in the Fillmore District for decades. She holds a deep love of the city and has been fighting to remain housed in San Francisco. Rashida describes her gender identity as gender non-conforming and frequently refers to herself as a stud. She is still working out how she understands her gender identity, but confidentiality asserts that she is a lesbian and that she has known this from a young age. Rashida constructs a nuanced narrative about her life and is able to reflect on difficult

times with humor and resilience. She tells her own story within the context of the local and global political issues that have shaped her life and have transformed the fabric of a city that looks very different from when she was a young child. Rashida was involved in the foster care system and soon after got caught up in the juvenile justice and adult justice systems. She speaks about the hard times that she experienced as a young person as transformative force that have propelled her to want to give back to her community and other young people. Rashida is a visible leader in her own family's life, and she is an important figure in the Bayview community.

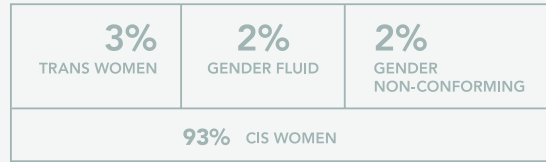


### Participant Demographics

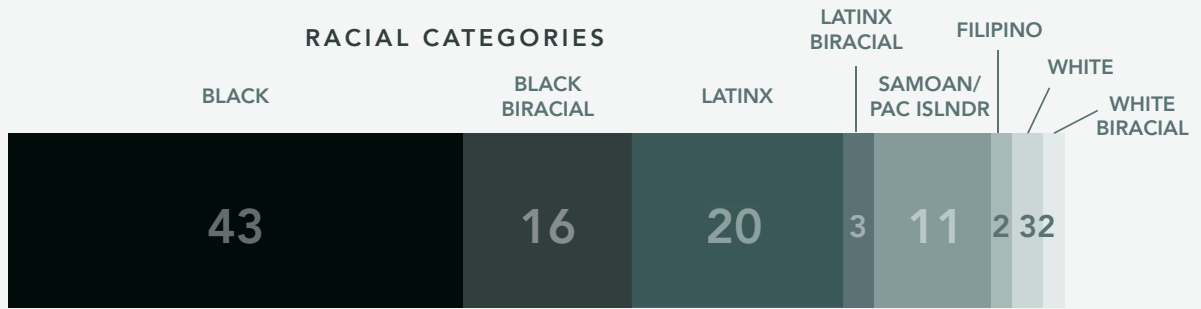
#### AGE RANGES



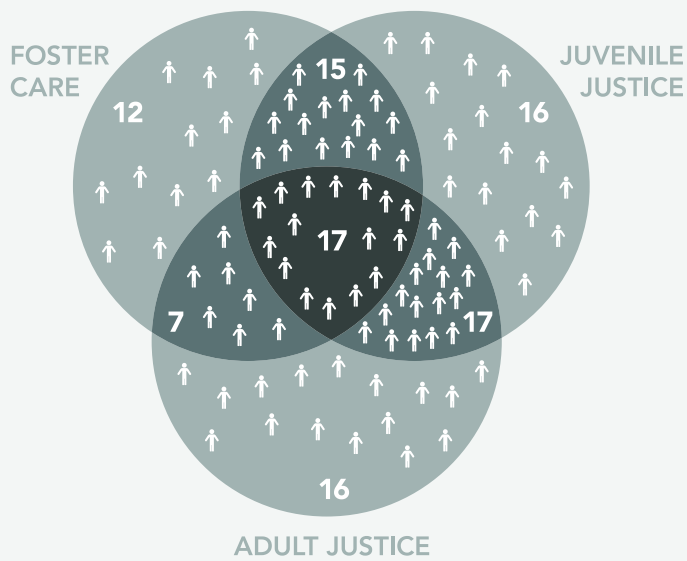
#### GENDER IDENTITIES



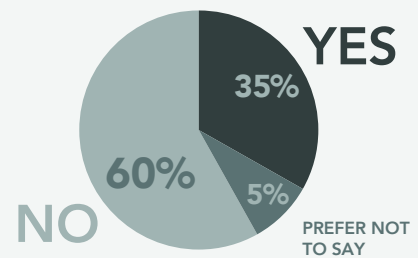
#### RACIAL CATEGORIES

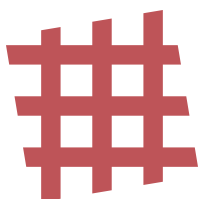


#### PROFILE OF PARTICIPANT SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT



#### IDENTIFICATION AS A MEMBER OF THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY





## findings

# FAMILY BACKGROUND

For many participants, discussing their families was a complicated conversation. Participants faced consistent barriers within the context of their home lives. Many people had to frequently move into unsafe neighborhoods, work at young ages to financially support their families, or had parents that were unavailable because they were incarcerated or worked long hours. The first question that the interviewers asked participants about their family background was, “Who were the people that helped to raise you while you were growing up?” Participants responded with a variety of answers, including the traditional mom and dad, but the responses were more expansive and consistently included extended family members and community members. Many participants lived with their grandparents or aunts and uncles in their adolescence, and these extended family members provided emotional and economic support. It was evident that the families of the participants held strong familial values and would extend themselves to support the development of their loved ones.

The picture of the American nuclear family for the people in this study was disrupted and fragmented as result of the lasting impact of economic inequality, 3 generations of mass incarceration, and the historical legacy of racism. During all 100 of the participants’ childhoods, 53% of mothers and 68% percent of fathers were incarcerated. Black families experience incarceration at higher rates, and this was reflected in this study. 71% of Black mothers and 80% of Black fathers had to manage parenting through different periods of incarceration. The siblings of the participants experienced high rates of incarceration as well; 3 out of 5 of their siblings were detained in the justice system.



Being an immigrant family and my mom being a single mom, having to navigate that shit’s hard. Then having the language barriers are hard too. To see that is hurtful because they think that this is the dream and that you’re going to get the help, but it’s not.

25 participants have mothers who were immigrants, migrating from Latin American Countries or from the Pacific Islands. Their families faced different challenges, especially if their parents did not speak English fluently or if they were undocumented. This participant is an immigrant herself traveling from a country plagued by civil war, her mother migrated to the United States for a better life, but over the years became disillusioned with the American dream.



### 71% of participant’s families were reported to Child Protective Services.

The participants in the study vividly remembered being checked up on by a CPS worker while they were growing up. Of the 71 people whose families were investigated 51 of them entered the foster care system as a result of the social worker’s findings.

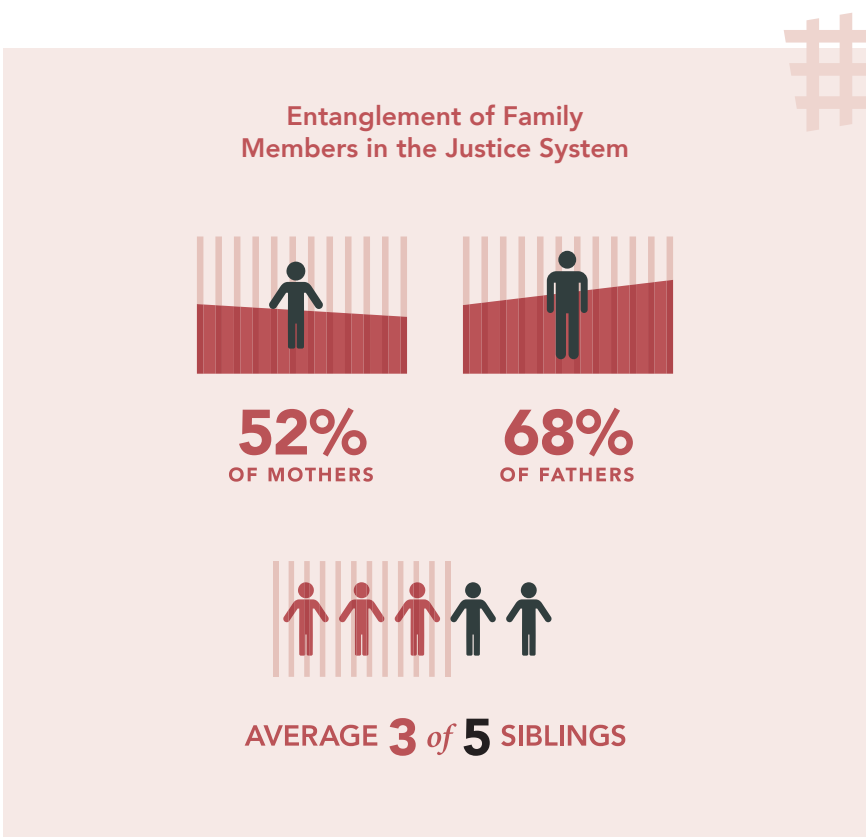


Parents ability to raise children is at a severe disadvantage when they are navigating the justice system. Having a criminal record limits employment and housing options for families. Many participants became involved in the foster care system when their mother became incarcerated. Families were broken up as a result, with siblings split up between foster placements and extended family members. A participant recalls having to take care of their siblings when their mother was incarcerated, “We have to grow up so fast that, I’m seven yesterday, today I’m 29. That’s how I’m looking at it. You’ve got to stay on your toes, in order to move in this society.” Children of all ages are traumatized when their mothers leave home for a detention center, and it is common for attachment disorders to arise with even small amounts of maternal separation<sup>18</sup>. School-aged children are at higher risk of delinquency and behavioral problems in their life when mothers are incarcerated. Even shorter periods of incarceration can affect children because of the disruption that is caused in homes when mothers depart and return from detention<sup>19</sup>. When mothers are in custody, a child’s ecosystems are upended, and they are bereft of the social and emotional support that their mothers can provide. Considering that the justice system detains the majority of women on non-violent offenses, social policymakers need to find alternative solutions to ensure the cohesiveness of families.

“We have to grow up so fast that, I’m seven yesterday, today I’m 29. That’s how I’m looking at it. You’ve got to stay on your toes, in order to move in this society.”

A participant discussing what is was like having a mother who was incarcerated while they were in secondary school.

It would be reductive to tell one story about the 100 participants’ family backgrounds, there was a lot of love in the retellings, but parents mostly were separated; 87% of participants’ parents were not together, and 58% witnessed their mothers negotiate



domestic partner violence. Participants described fraught relationships with their parents, and it was often told within the context of the social, institutional, and economic landscape that their parents were negotiating. Childhoods were tough when parents had to work too much and were not around, or when moms stayed in unhealthy relationships, perhaps to secure housing. It is essential to delineate the love a parent has for their children from the circumstances that they are faced with that color their ability to parent at their best. It is unjust to put people in impossible conditions and then expect them not to survive in the environment that they are living in. Of the 100 participants, 55 were removed from their home and placed in foster care. An institutional conversation might focus on the unfitness of the parent and their inability to properly take care of their child, and the solution would be to provide parenting classes. Creating a context where families in poor neighborhoods of color have less involvement with Child Welfare would require economic opportunity, dismantling of mass incarceration, fair housing practices, and more equitable schools. A real investment in families in poor working-class neighborhoods would be an investment in the communities that they occupy.



## RASHIDA'S STORY

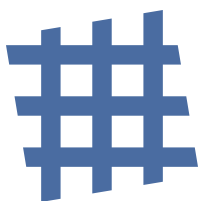
Rashida spent her earliest years in the Fillmore District in her grandmother's home with her mother, father, and 3 younger sisters. She was raised by both of her parents, grandmother, and a large extended family. She remembers the Fillmore District well because her grandmother had a large apartment where family members and friends would gather for holidays. Rashida recalls the upset and pain her family went through when her grandmother was displaced from her decades-old apartment.

Rashida's family dynamic and financial stability changed when her family moved to Alice Griffith Public Housing in the Bayview District. Her mother began negotiating a physically and emotionally abusive relationship with her father. Rashida's father eventually became incarcerated on domestic violence charges. Once her father went to prison, her mother became the sole breadwinner, and an already tenuous economic situation became untenable. The children in the family began living with relatives as Rashida's mother regained financial stability.

When Rashida turned 14, her mother became incarcerated with charges related to drug use. Rashida acted as the oldest child in her family,

even though she has a brother who is 9 years her senior. She had to begin taking on adult responsibilities from a young age to help support her family while her mother was in detention. About a year later when Rashida had just turned 14, she was placed in a foster home, along with one of her siblings.

At 17, Rashida's mother was released from incarceration and she was able to reunify her family. Rashida, her mother, and sisters all lived together in her uncle's apartment in the Alice Griffith Housing Project. At 16, Rashida came out to her friends at school. She came out to her family at 17, and her mother kicked her out of their home for being queer. Rashida describes the heartbreak she experienced when she lost the support of her mother: "Damn, I'm still your kid. I'm still yours." Rashida, like many youths in the LGBTQ community, experienced rejection from her family, which can act as a pathway to homelessness or justice involvement, especially during high school years when familial support is crucial to the development of healthy long-term life outcomes. Today, Rashida has reunited with her family after years of estrangement, and she is focused on building a loving relationship with her mother and siblings.



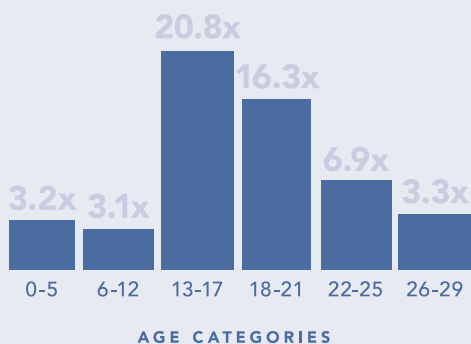
## *findings* HOUSING

From the start of the project, the research team knew that housing had to be a focal point of the interview. All the researchers work at the YWFC and see the immediate needs that their members face in San Francisco. Housing is the most common and persistent obstacle faced by poor communities of color in the Bay Area. Stable housing provides the foundation for people to focus on other aspects of their lives and to build the skills and practices that will create self-determined futures. Without stable housing, participants were at risk of losing their children or had to spend a majority of their time looking for a place to stay at night. The constant search for housing created a schedule that did not afford them time to maintain consistent employment or attend school. Even though the researchers understood the dire housing conditions in San Francisco, they were shocked at the stories they heard.



I see it first hand, like Prop. C. They just want to clean the street, but homeless doesn't always look like that. Homeless is, "I'm eight months pregnant, working full time, living in my car. There's different types of homeless."

The interview started with participants providing a chronological history of every place they laid their head at night, including apartments, houses, streets, night-to-night hotels, cars, the justice system, foster care, and any other institutional setting. The participants and researchers worked together to develop a consistent timeline, and then participants



This graph represents the average amount of times people moved within a particular age category for participants that were involved in all 3 systems (foster care, juvenile justice, and adult justice systems).

The housing graphs show that participants involved in all three systems faced extreme housing instability during two age ranges, 13-17 and 18-21. The moves per person include every time a participant is incarcerated, moves into a new foster home, or moves between housing settings in their community. The 13-21 age range is a time where an average middle-class person would attend high school and college and would then prepare to enter the job market, setting themselves up for a lifetime of financial security.





were asked about the specifics of each housing placement. The researchers recorded how long they stayed somewhere, who lived with them, general experiences, and the reason they moved. The housing history provided a framework for participants to retell their life histories. More than any other section of the life history, people emotionally broke down the most when speaking about what it was like to continually have to think about where they were going to live. The chronic stress of housing instability was profound and provided the backdrop for people’s ability to navigate the other aspects of their lives. Participants had to frequently negotiate where they would spend the night, moving between friends’ couches, night-to-night hotels, and shelters. At the same time, they are attending school, meeting with probation officers, and parenting their children. What all too often gets lost in the narratives about system-involved women, girls, and TGNC people is the ingenuity, stamina, and forward plan that is required to balance so many tenuous situations at once.



It’s not good fun being displaced routinely. It’s really not.

Housing played a significant role in how participants were able to navigate the foster care and justice systems. Many participants expressed a desire to have their probation officers work more actively with them to find housing. Participants’ likelihood to recidivate was decreased if they were able to secure a form of stable housing.

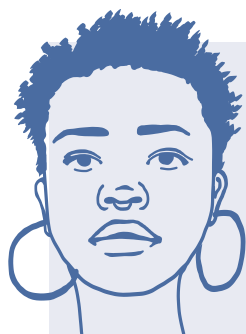


Housing has impacted my life big time. Not just myself but my family. Being 21 and getting out of prison, not having a home to come to because your mom got pushed out and you weren’t able to help her. Having to feel helpless, not able to help her navigate that system that pushed families out. Having to be homeless, having to live on the streets, having to navigate couch to couch or even sleep on some stairs, just because I don’t have nowhere to go.

Participants spoke about the compounding obstacles that they encountered once they left jail or prison

The housing history is a complex dataset to analyze due to frequent moves between varying locations in the Bay Area. Later reports will provide a more in-depth analysis of the way that housing intersects with involvement in school and the justice system. One of the immediate recommendations that participants had was for San Francisco to change the definition of homelessness. Many did not qualify for services because they were not technically living on the streets. Solutions for affordable housing are incredibly challenging, as the issue crosses public and private interests. After hearing 100 housing histories, the YWFC team firmly asserts that housing is a human right and drastic and immediate efforts need to

take place in San Francisco so that young people no longer have to worry about where they will lay their heads each and every night.



## RASHIDA'S STORY

When Rashida Greene was born, her family lived in the Fillmore District in a large condo that her grandmother had been renting for several decades. Rashida remembers her early childhood home as a happy place that was filled with extended family members. At the same time, she also remembers her grandmother complaining about the landlord raising rent despite not attending to the home repairs that the space needed. Rashida's grandmother eventually lost her apartment through what Rashida described as an illegal eviction. She reflects on her grandmother's home with deep sadness because it was a focal point for their family gatherings and provided her immediate family with a stable place to live.

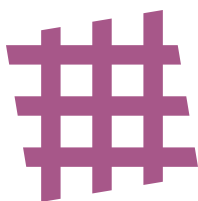
After the eviction, Rashida's immediate family became homeless and stayed in local homeless shelters and their car for 4 months before moving to Alice Griffith in the Bayview with their uncle. After a year in their uncle's apartment, Rashida's mother received her housing placement and they moved into an apartment in the same building. Her family had a one-bedroom apartment for the first time. Rashida's family stayed in this apartment until her mother became incarcerated at the age of 13. Then, she and her sister moved into different family members' homes for about 11 months before Child Protective Services became involved. Rashida worked with a CPS social worker to find family placements for her two youngest sisters but was unable to find a placement for herself and her oldest sister. Eventually, they were both placed with 2 separate foster families outside of San Francisco.

From the ages of 14 - 17 ½, Rashida lived in institutional settings within the foster care and juvenile justice systems. She frequently moved around between different foster care homes, group homes, and stays in juvenile hall. Rashida's housing instability during this time made it difficult for her to focus on school as she was occupied with acclimating to new environments and staying safe among strangers. When Rashida's mother was released from detention, she fought for 6 months to regain custody of all of her children, and when

Rashida was 17 ½, she moved in with her mother and siblings in Bayview but left soon after she came out to her family.

Rashida moved in with her older girlfriend around the Panhandle until she was around 20. She moved between friends and family members' apartments during this time because of the volatile nature of her romantic relationship. She describes this period of her life as living couch-to-couch. Rashida tried to find more stable housing through local programs but was limited because she was not considered homeless. She put her name on wait lists for public housing and Section 8 but was told that there would be a long wait. At 21, after an exhaustive search for housing, Rashida decided to break up with her girlfriend and figure out life and housing on her own. She knew she wanted to stay in San Francisco because her younger sisters were still in school and she played a significant role in their lives and education. Moving outside of the city where housing is less expensive was not an option for her.

Rashida describes the years that followed as plagued by homelessness. For a time, Rashida lived in between her car and friends' apartments. Finally, she ran out of options and stayed in night-to-night hotels in the Tenderloin. The hotels were expensive, and the amount she paid for this type of unstable housing would be enough for a decent apartment in another city. Rashida did not feel that it would be safe staying in a shelter, and the curfew requirements would not allow her to work. Other possible shelters had and continue to have strict requirements on the populations of people that they serve. Rashida tried looking at market rate housing, but they were all too expensive and required substantial down payments or a guarantor, all of which she did not have access to. Rashida was always a strong student and would like to further her education but is waiting until she finds stable housing. Recently, Rashida moved in with her aunt in a small crowded apartment and expressed with conviction that she will secure an apartment soon.



# findings

## FOSTER CARE

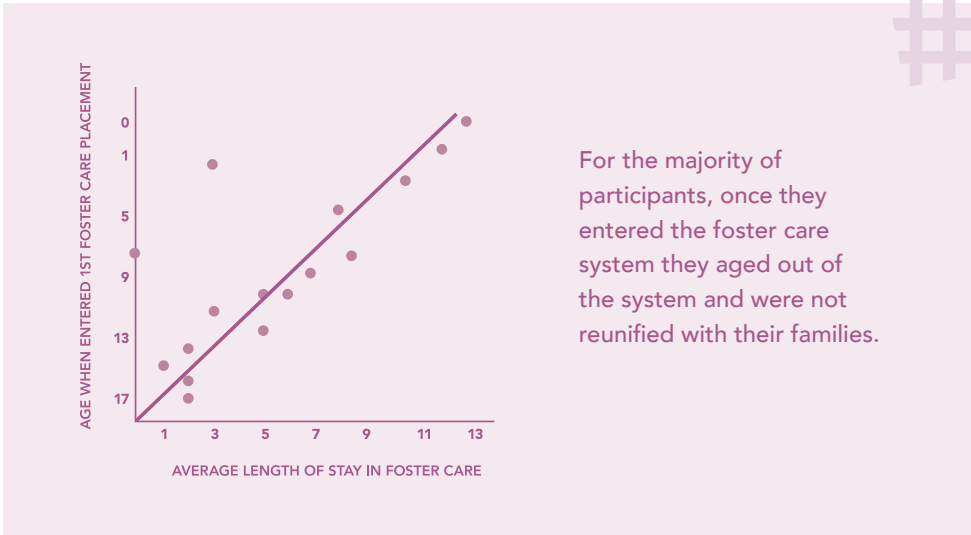
No matter the type of placement, foster care is a stressful experience for children because they are being removed from their home. Of the participants, 51 were involved in the foster care system. Ideally, before entering, a social worker attempts to find a family placement for a young person if they need to be removed from their home. However, it can be difficult for family members to qualify or become certified quickly enough to take in a loved one. When CPS removes a young person from their home, they become dislocated from their family, community, and heritage. A young person reflects on this dislocation: “I think that it’s interrupted a lot of things. I think that it took away my native tongue, for me to be able to communicate with just family members.”



I just think about the time that they were able to remove my dad, and then they were able to remove myself. That’s my intro to systems, it’s like you can’t even have your own living space. They could just straight up go in your house, knock down your door. That’s what it means to be impacted to have things ripped apart and people outside that you don’t even know.

Participants experiences with being in Foster Care

Participants recounted different stories of their time in foster care. Some people described loving foster parents who invested in them and supported their emotional and educational development. Others had less suitable foster parents and complained of emotional or physical abuse. Many participants wanted the system to perform more extensive screenings of potential foster parents, and they did not feel free to complain to their social worker for fear of retaliation or because meetings with the social worker took place in front of the foster parent. A common experience for participants was a desire for more stability in their placements. They did not want to move around between placements because of the destabilizing



For the majority of participants, once they entered the foster care system they aged out of the system and were not reunified with their families.

nature of the experience. All the young people that were placed in group homes complained about this setting and felt that these institutions were more akin to a detention center than a healthy home.

The average length of time participants stayed in the foster care system varied by race. Black and Latinx participants remained in the foster care system almost 3 times longer than their White and Pacific Islander peers. A stated goal of the foster care system is family reunification, but 59%

of the participants never returned to their biological family once they were removed. In an ideal system, families would get the support they need to reunite with their children. A goal of foster care should be to provide families with the support needed to stay unified whenever possible, and when that is not an option social workers should make an effort to find a family placement so young people can stay connected to their families and cultural heritage.

Participants spoke about how their entry into the foster care system coincided with disciplinary and academic problems in school, and later justice system involvement. Young people reported feeling targeted in their schools and the justice system because of their placement in foster care. Many young people reported being placed into special education classes after they were in the foster system. One young person reflected on their special education status: “Yeah, I was a kid. But what I’m saying is I had anger issues. I was angry because I got taken away from my mom and all this stuff.” In this study, 73% of all foster youth were involved in the justice system, and some of these cases emerged directly out of circumstances that arose from living in a group home. Of course, young people may be placed in foster care when the Child Welfare system deems it unsafe for them to remain



I think that it's interrupted a lot of things. I think that it took away my native tongue, for me to be able to communicate with just family members.

Participants experiences with being in Foster Care

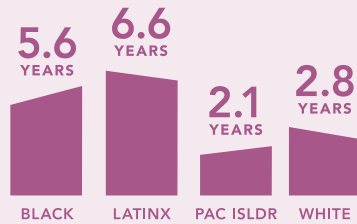


I always look at the mission statement of CPS. I really want them to look at their mission statement. If it's to get families to where they need to be, and connect them with somebody in the family, or find that ideal home. It's not to remove the kid.

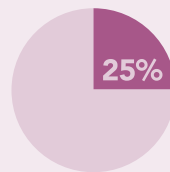
A young person in foster care reflects on CPS.



### Length of Stay in Foster Care

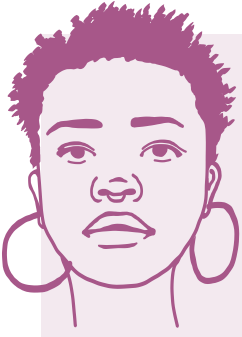


### Foster care participants who lived in at least 1 group home



Youth who are in group homes or congregant care are at a higher risk of delinquency. Even one group home placement puts youth at 2.5 times more likelihood to become involved in the justice system than their peers who are in a home setting<sup>20</sup>

in their homes because of abuse or neglect. The process of removing a child from their home of origin because of abuse or neglect is traumatic in and of itself. Once Child Welfare places a youth into a new home setting, they then have to acclimate to the new environment. This can severely hinder their ability to perform in school and breaks the social bonds that they had with their friends and family. It also provides them with little emotional support to make such a difficult life transition.



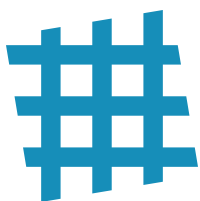
## RASHIDA'S STORY

When Rashida turned 14, she was placed in the foster care system while her mother was in detention. From the age of 14 until 17 ½, Rashida moved through different foster care placements within the Bay Area and in Southern California. She speaks positively about her first foster care mother: "She really cared, and she wasn't just in it for the money. The money, she didn't care about." Rashida reflects back on her ability to get on top of her school work with her new foster mother's support: "Yes, she cooked breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Dropped us off at school every morning and picked us up. Made sure if we were having problems at school, she talked to us about it. Before her, I'd say my GPA would have been like a 1.7. While I was with her, my GPA went up to 3.8." Rashida was able to stay in the foster home in San Francisco for 10 months before CPS moved her to Monterey. She does not remember why her social worker moved her and recalled how upsetting it was to move away from her home city of San Francisco. Rashida wanted to make her way back home to San Francisco to see her family, and so she ran away from her new foster family placement. During this time, she became involved in the juvenile justice system, as she navigated her way home and began working in the underground street economy.

Once Rashida entered the justice system at 15 years-old, the judge and her CPS social worker decided where Rashida would live. She lived in 5 different group homes in Northern California

before her mother regained custody of her. Rashida frequently ran away from her placements because she felt physically unsafe and because she wanted to see her family. Rashida ran away from two group homes because she was being targeted for being gender non-conforming and was experiencing physical abuse. Running away caused her to violate and extend her probation, and to be placed in a lockdown group home facility, where she now had to attend high school. Rashida is passionately against children living in group homes and hopes that other young people do not have to live in similar conditions. She did not feel understood or supported in her placement. Eventually, Rashida moved to a group home that was back in San Francisco in December but was not allowed to visit her family during the holidays. She was not allowed to visit with her older brother because he had a record with the justice system, so she ran away again, causing the extension of her probation once more.

The housing issues that Rashida faced throughout her childhood made it difficult to excel in school because her attention had to be focused on managing changing foster care placements and still trying to attend to her younger siblings' needs while she was gone. Rashida's placement in the foster care system is illustrative of the inequitable impact that economic inequality and the justice system has on poor communities of color and how these experiences shape young people's lives



# findings SCHOOL

The home life and community of the participants created a context where most did not feel a strong connection to their school, although many found enjoyment in learning and recognized the value of pursuing education. Even in elementary school, only 36% of participants reported that they had a positive experience and this number steadily declined as young people entered middle and high school. For many of the participants, schools were not spaces where they felt welcomed and supported, and they expressed wishes that their teachers took more time getting to know them and the particulars of their life.



You get in trouble 'cause you don't bring a pencil and paper. Or you get suspended on the third day, you didn't bring school supplies, and the teacher can't afford it. You can't afford it either, 'cause you've got low income.

One person shared a highly unfair reason for being suspended



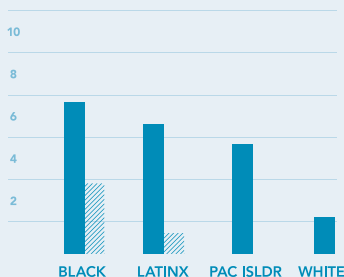
For me, it's embarrassing. You said my whole name on the intercom. No! Call my parents first, and then talk to the teacher on the side or something.

One participant describes how they felt when she was called out publicly for getting suspended

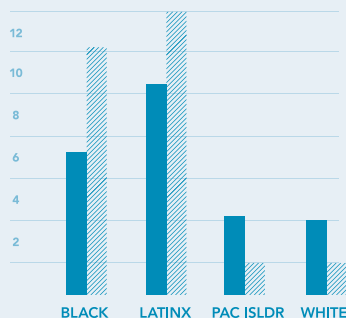
When the interviewers asked if the school knew that participants were in foster care or facing homelessness, they said that their teachers did not know and they did not receive additional support. While singling students out creates its own risks, the school could provide much-needed wrap-around support outside of the child welfare or juvenile justice systems. Some participants recounted that a few teachers made a difference in their lives, and they took the time to invest in them. This added support made a difference in their lives, but these types of teachers were sparse. Attending school and engaging in academic work was a struggle for many participants as they managed unstable housing and system-involvement, while also earning an income at young ages and taking care of siblings.

AVERAGE # OF DISCIPLINARY ACTIONS

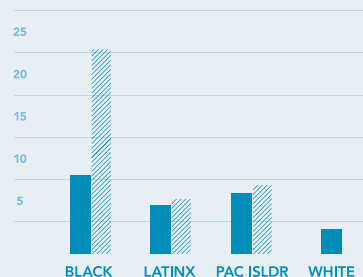
## Elementary School



## Middle School



## High School



■ SUSPENSION    ▨ EXPULSIONS



## SPECIAL EDUCATION

32 of the participants were in a special education setting, and only 5 of them felt that this programming helped them with their learning and school achievement. Most of the special education students felt targeted in some way. Participants felt that the school did not consider what they were managing in their home life. Other participants were labeled once they entered the foster care or the juvenile justice system.



‘Why me?’ I was in foster care from when I was little, so they automatically put me in special ED because of my behavior. It was like, “You’ve got ADHD,” but I’m just a kid. I ain’t got ADHD, I’m just hyper. But that messed up my education because as I got older, I stayed in special ED, because in that class, you don’t learn. You just play around, so I never really learned. It’s kind of hard for me to learn now because of that.

I was in special ed, probably. Maybe because of my behavior. I shouldn’t be in special ED because I’m an angry kid, because I got a lot of shit going on.

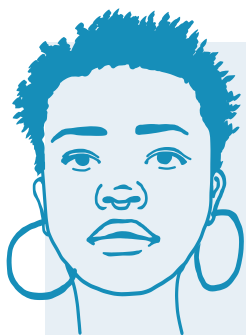
Outside of 2 participants, everyone attended their local community public school. These schools were in low-income communities and were affected by issues in the surrounding community. 68% of people agreed or strongly agreed that their school was impacted by community violence. 64 participants had a classmate that died because of a homicide, and several people had to step out of the room and take a break when this question was asked in order to deal with the tragedy of losing a friend’s life at such a young age.

The participants in the study faced consistent disciplinary action throughout elementary, middle, and high school and this affected Black and Latinx girls the most. Participants primarily focused on being disciplined as they retold their school histories, instead of sharing typical school-age experiences that are common in middle-class communities. In elementary school, Black participants were suspended on average 6.9 times, and Latinx participants were suspended 6.3 times. Almost all the suspensions were a result of fighting or being defiant towards a teacher, which is a subjective charge. The interviewers asked if the school intervened to provide additional support or to inquire about what was going on at home, and participants did not share that their school tried any restorative interventions. Participants shared that they felt targeted for their race, particularly the Black participants, and that this weighed on the school’s decisions to expel or suspend them. Disciplinary actions continued in middle and high school and participants faced high expulsion rates in middle and high school, forcing students to move between schools several times. Many students had to change schools when their families moved and that is unavoidable, but expulsion required that students move around. In this study, participants attended 3.7 high schools on average. When schools handle discipline publically it can affect students’

self-esteem, self-efficacy, and motivation. The YWFC recommends that schools engage in restorative justice practices and provide young people with the support they need so they are less likely to engage in behavior that will get them suspended or expelled.

As the researchers looked at the school data, they felt that school was a missed opportunity for the participants because many of them articulated that they truly enjoyed learning. Participants expressed a desire to learn more about their ethnic heritage and wanted classes to cover culturally relevant curriculum. Repeatedly, participants felt that schools should teach students about life skills like credit, financial planning, and the rental application processes. 62% of participants graduated high school, and 59% furthered their

education after high school through attending some community college. Only 1 person graduated from a four-year university, and 7 people graduated with an associate's degree from a community college. The participants wanted to continue their educations after high school but found attending school to be expensive. They lacked institutional support and the personal economic stability necessary to continue, as they were balancing earning an income and securing housing. Many participants were taking advantage of free classes at City College in San Francisco but needed more financial support to be able to excel in their coursework. Overall, schools could have been a place where students were given the extra support that they needed to excel in life and develop skills that would ensure their long term economic stability as there was not a lack of desire, only a paucity of access, opportunity, and high-quality schools.



## RASHIDA'S STORY

Rashida attended her local public elementary school in Bayview Hunters Point and recalled: "It was very diverse, it was full. I loved the field trips a lot and the multicultural events." From a young age, Rashida has loved social studies and learning about her cultural and ethnic history. She always did well with her school work because, "My mom didn't play about school. Let's say regardless of what I was doing or how I was doing it, I knew I had to do my work. I knew my work had to be done."

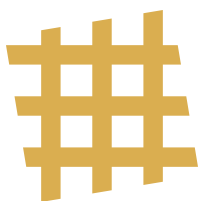
While Rashida was engaged in her school work, she struggled with other students in school bullying her about her gender identity. This was a source of anger for Rashida, and she was suspended 6 times from elementary school for, "Fighting, mostly with the teacher or just not listening, acting up in class." Rashida reports that teachers did ask about her home life and she worked with a school counselor, but she was not able to open up to her. In the 5th grade, Rashida told her teachers that her classmates had been bullying her for months, but the school did little to intervene. Eventually, Rashida became worn down by the bullying and got into a fight with the other students that were targeting her. As a result, she was expelled from school. At her new school, the teachers suggested that she get tested for Special Education services because she was dealing with issues at home and they reported that she struggled to maintain attention in class. Rashida was not happy with the decision and did not qualify for services because she tested too high on the qualification exams. Rashida shared that this process made her feel confused and diminished because she always did well with her school work

and performed well on exams.

Once Rashida entered high school, she recalled feeling more mature and did not get suspended or expelled as she did in middle and elementary school. Rashida played basketball and enjoyed hanging out with her friends, in addition to her responsibilities at home. However, Rashida did continue to have issues with her teachers and classmates and felt targeted: "I think it would have something to do with me being gay honestly." When Rashida's teachers kicked her out of class, she would go to her school's Wellness Center where she found solace and spoke with adults with whom she could confide in and with whom she trusted.

Rashida decided to leave high school because her life outside of school became complicated as she was frequently shuffled to and from different foster care placements across and outside of the Bay Area. Rashida chose to take an exit exam so that she could leave school and spend more time working, and she passed the exam on her first try. However, Rashida's school setup a meeting with her social worker and foster parent to discuss the exam. She recalls, "Because it was like they didn't expect me to pass. It was a shocker to where they called this meeting. Just for me passing the test. It was like, 'I'm not stupid.' The principal was actually the one that called the damn meeting and thought I was stupid." Eventually, Rashida was able to leave school early with her GED. Rashida does not discuss any immediate plans for college but views it as a long-term goal because she always loved history and learning about African American culture.





## findings

# JUVENILE JUSTICE

Participants were asked to share the details of different encounters they had with the juvenile justice system, and to go through the particulars of each of their cases. 65 participants were part of the juvenile justice system and they entered through 3 central pathways—school, foster care, and survival crimes. Some young people had incidents in their school settings that resulted in police action. Others were in foster home settings, typically group homes, and had episodes with their peers. In cases involving school or foster care, restorative justice options would have been an appropriate alternative to incarceration, particularly because youth positioned in wealthier neighborhoods would likely not become involved in the justice system for similar incidents. Participants also entered the justice system

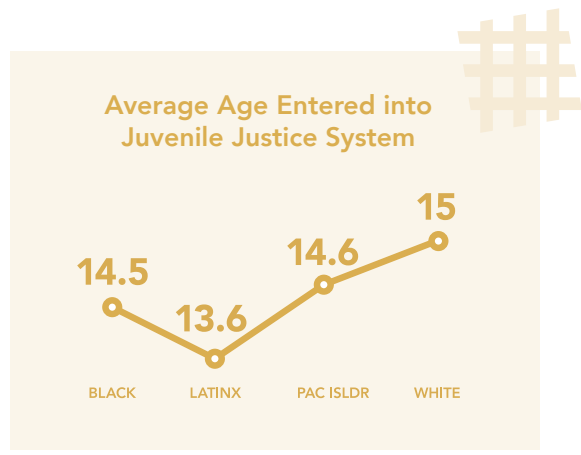
for crimes related to stealing. Some were petty theft charges, others more serious charges of grand theft or burglary. The vast majority of participants were involved in the juvenile justice system because of a survival crime where they needed to earn money at a young age to support themselves and their families, or from being over policed in their homes and schools. The stories that the girls and TGNC youth recalled were not violent incidents or chronic, criminal behavior. These were histories of what it is like to survive as a young person in a city where displacement, caused by mass incarceration and lack of economic opportunities, drives day to day life. The experience of being involved in the juvenile justice system shifted adolescence from a time of learning and planning for their future to one with frequent stays in juvenile hall and weekly meetings with probation officers.

“  
All of a sudden, I’m going to prison at 19. It was just at one point of my life. This doesn’t make you who you are.”

“  
You’re already profiling me as a trouble kid and then I’m going to get arrested or I’m going to become that statistic where you’re not giving a shit about my education when you should be worried about what’s going on in my household for me to be that way. And supporting me through that.”

A young person describing being profiled at an early age because of her family background and the neighborhood she grew up in

63% of juvenile justice participants had only 1 or 2 convicted crimes as a minor. Only 10% of participants had more chronic justice involvement, with 5 or more cases. Given that most young people were low-risk individuals, the term of probation and lengths



of detention stays were high for all participants, with White participants facing much lower terms overall. The participants were not detained for extended periods, rarely ever exceeding 6 months. The average lengths of detention are not for 1 or 2 extended stays, but multiple short lengths, frequently resulting from technical probation violations. Frequent, shorter stays were incredibly disruptive to participants' ability to engage in school and build healthy relationships with their peers. Participants

reported many challenges with probation as they had to check in with a probation officer frequently and were mandated to see service providers or take classes related to their conviction. Preferably, young people would be provided with activities that enrich their social, emotional, and academic development, instead of being under supervision. The researchers have presented initial findings from the survey and will continue to analyze the data in order to explore the intersections between justice involvement and other systems that have a large presence in the participants' lives. The initial reflections presented in this report are a small piece of the work, and the contextualization of the stories and lives of the participants and their relationship to justice involvement is an essential area of exploration moving forward.

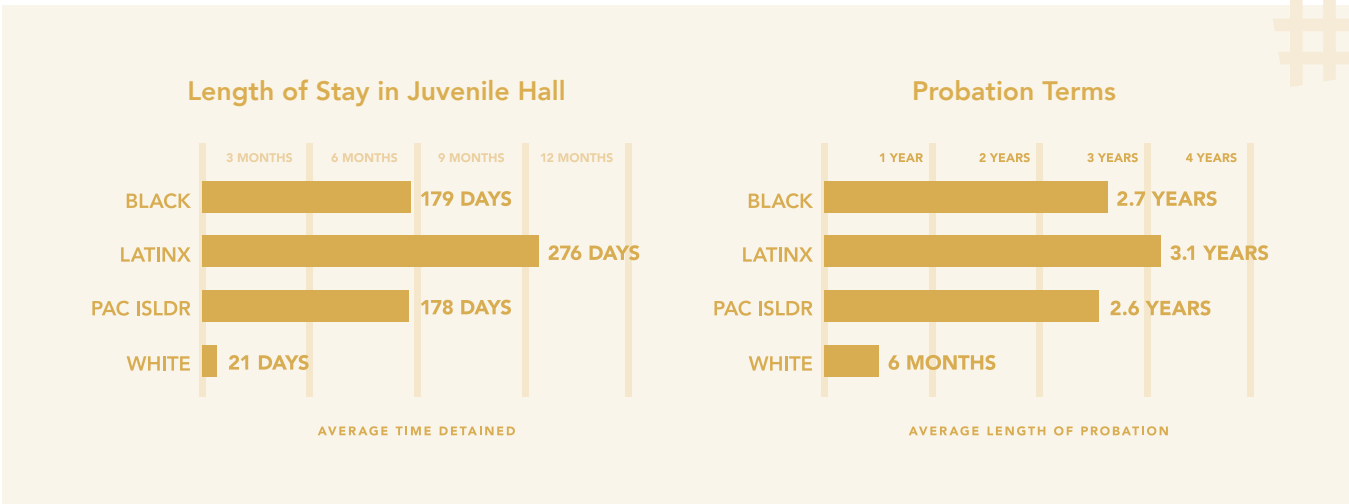
I don't know if they really know of the impact of the power that they hold. Do they know that coming and taking this child will result in this person being in a cell? Will result in this thing happening. Do they understand the domino effect of what they do? If they really understand the impact that they have in somebody's life, that you don't just affect me, you affect my future generation, you affect everybody. I just think that they make really quick decisions without really thinking it through.

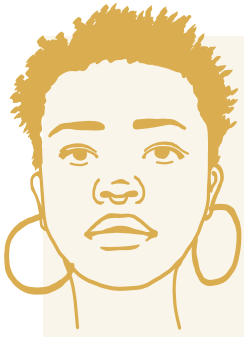
Participant Reflections on Being in the Juvenile Justice System

She's got a petty theft case. Let her serve her time, and then give her the resources that you think are appropriate so that she won't re-offend and steal something off the store again. Then let her go. If you don't have the real solution for this person, then why is she still serving in the system? That is not the end goal.

One participant describes the contradiction around having a long term of probation with a minor misdemeanor case.

Overall, participants unilaterally complained about their experiences in the juvenile justice system and how involvement contributed to a deepening feeling of neglect and translated into missed opportunities and loss of common childhood experiences. Adults in positions of authority need to deeply consider the decisions that they make for young people and invest in models and solutions that will allow youth to health and develop into healthy adults.

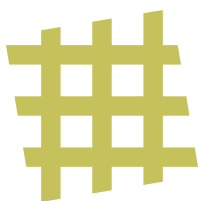




## RASHIDA'S STORY

Rashida became involved in the juvenile justice system in San Francisco at the age of 15 when she ran away from her foster placement in Monterey. She returned to Bayview to be closer to her siblings and extended family because she did not feel physically safe with her second foster care placement. While Rashida was finding friends and family to stay with, she had to provide for herself financially and worked in the underground street economy. Rashida was taken to San Francisco Juvenile Hall on petty theft and assault charges while she was getting supplies for herself at a local drug store while living couch-to-couch. Rashida was detained for 4 weeks at San Francisco's Juvenile Hall because they were unable to find a housing placement for her through the foster care system. As a result, she moved into her first of many group homes in San Francisco and the surrounding Bay Area. Rashida ran away from many of her group home placements, which caused her probation to be extended because of technical violations.

Rashida entered the juvenile justice system 8 other times before she turned 18 years-old but was only charged with one additional theft case. The other times that she was detained were due to probation violations for running away or not adhering to her stay-away orders. Rashida's two convicted cases were crimes related to survival and her need to navigate an adult world as a minor. Rashida reflects back on her experience in the court system and with working with the judge: "No, I don't think she really listened to the case or took it into consideration or nothing. They do what they want. Your life is not yours when you're in there. Your freedom is really nothing." Rashida wanted support during this time and wishes that the justice system could have better addressed the chronic trauma she experienced as a child, instead of punishing her during a time of her life that she was separated from her family.



## findings

# ADULT JUSTICE SYSTEM

The consequences of involvement in the adult justice system create different challenges than those experienced from juvenile justice system involvement. Juvenile conviction records, in most cases, do not follow people as they move through their lives. As a result, this does not impact their ability to gain employment, this allows a person to move forward in their lives. Conversely, adults in the criminal justice system have a conviction record that can permanently affect their ability to gain employment or secure housing. A participant discusses the gravity of the enduring effect of adult justice involvement, “All of a sudden, I’m going to prison at 19. It was just at one point of my life. This doesn’t make you who you are.” 57 participants were involved in the adult justice system, and of those 59% were also involved in the juvenile justice system. Participants had an average of 4.3 convicted cases, and 28% of participants had 5 or more convicted cases. Participants had long terms of probation and spent around 6 months to a year in detention. Similar to the juvenile justice system, the vast majority of crimes convicted were related to the pursuit to earn additional income.



24th was my community. That’s where I lived, that’s where I navigated, and yet, my friend’s having a seizure, and I get sent to prison for a violation. That stopped me for a whole week from working and trying to get some money, trying to navigate myself. Simple stay-away orders, that’s where we live, that’s our community and you’re pushing us away from our community.

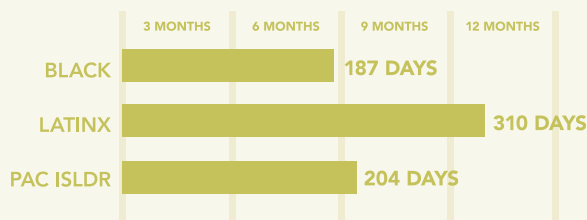


I have to my record, my fees, my restitutions, that stuff that holds me back from trying to save money or me getting a card from the bank.

Participant reflections on incarceration

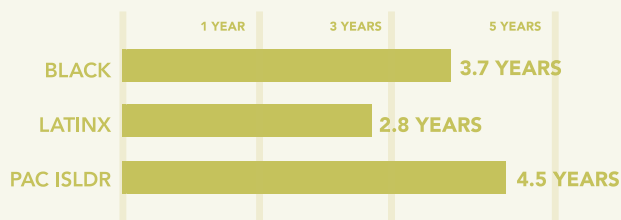
In adulthood, frequent check-ins with probation officers or extended stays in detention interfere with basic responsibilities. Several participants described losing their children to CPS when they were incarcerated or when they could not find a family member to take care of their children. Other participants reported losing their apartment because they could not afford to continue paying rent, or being removed from housing waiting lists because they were detained. All of these

### Average Time Detained



AVERAGE TIME DETAINED

### Probation Terms



AVERAGE LENGTH OF PROBATION



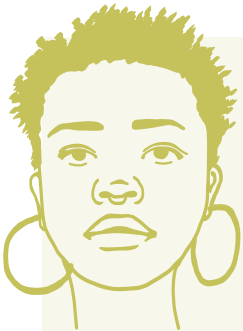
circumstances made re-entry even more challenging. When participants re-entered their communities the financial burdens from incarceration constrained them as they were trying to rebuild their lives. Participants' records barred them from higher paying jobs and potential career paths, and records make getting public housing or Section 8 vouchers difficult. The process of surveillance continues through probation, and positioned those with records at a constant threat of being detained. Nearly all of the participants reported experiencing the psychological fear and anxiety that the restrictive conditions of probation or parole produce.

Moving away from a system of mass incarceration will require policymakers to expand their scope of analysis and praxis to include the conditions that create a context where people have a need to supplement their income by working in the underground street economy. Solutions and alternatives to incarceration need to focus on building healthy, inclusive practices that provide marginalized communities with the necessary skills and opportunities to navigate our current economy. To forge a way forward, activists and policymakers need to hold two contradictory realities—a commitment to both the dismantling of the prison industrial complex and the creation of healthy, sustainable communities in traditionally marginalized urban and suburban areas. The prevalence and magnitude of the carceral state in American history has recently been accepted by academics and policymakers alike. It is time to create alternative policies to provide solutions that are rooted in the experiential knowledge of marginalized communities.



It's just another system, and you know what? They're banking off of us if we go to prison. There you go. That's prison labor. A form of modern day slavery. That's all that is. 13th amendment right there. They made sure to write that into the Constitution.

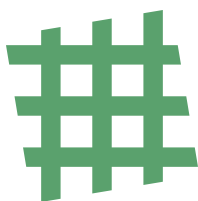
One participant shares thoughts with an acute awareness of the historical legacy of systemic oppression



### RASHIDA'S STORY

Rashida became involved in the adult justice system when she was homeless at age 21. She was struggling with housing, and this made holding down a job difficult. Rashida was charged with grand theft and had to serve a 7-month long sentence. She will be on probation for 3 years.

Rashida has not been involved in the justice system since and has been following through with the terms of her probation. She is concerned that this felony will impact her ability to get housing or secure stable employment.



## findings

# MAKING MONEY

The youth researchers entitled the employment section “making money” because they anticipated that people might be working jobs in the above-ground economy or underground street economy. They aimed to make participants comfortable when speaking about their experiences securing an income, without feeling shame or stigma.

People combined a variety of strategies to secure an income, including part-time employment, government subsidies, and income from the underground street economy. In their teenage years, over half of the participants joined summer programs that targeted low-income youth through local community-based organizations. They enjoyed working in the community and supporting young people. As they entered adulthood, many of these jobs were out of reach because of their criminal record or lack of educational histories. Approximately 50% of the participants were not working at the time of the interviews. However, their schedules were full as they attended probation meetings, acted as primary caretakers of children, navigated the housing market, and worked part-time or low paying jobs.



I feel like I catch myself dreaming of success a lot. A lot of white people, they wake up in success. Us people of color, we got to start from the bottom. We got to get it every day, it's not a choice. Failure is not an option for us, it's not a choice. For some others, they wake up in it.

Economic inequality is acutely felt in San Francisco and seen as a condition that operates along racial lines.



We don't get no opportunities to elevate ourselves to excel.

San Francisco's job market has an abundance of employment opportunities, and most of these are closed off to the participants. Some people spoke of wanting to work as a courier or driver in different technology start-ups, but were disqualified because of their record. Most participants worked as cashiers, and only 12% of those in the study have held a position above entry level. A small group of people, 11%, had professional careers, and those that did worked in their community in non-profits, communicated that they found meaning through this type of work because of their ability to enrich their community. Participant's ability to secure a job that pays a living wage was likely hindered by their lack of higher education. It is crucial to avoid conflating lack of access with a lack of ability or work ethic. While there are many jobs in San Francisco, low-income communities of color are excluded. Jessica Nowlan, the Executive Director of YWFC, describes the experience that these participants have of living in San Francisco precisely when she says, “It is like looking onto the freeway, seeing success and wealth, and not being able to find the on-ramp.”

Many participants relied on government subsidies to supplement their income so that they could support themselves and their families. 72% of the participants used food stamps. The vast majority of mothers, 93%, used welfare. One participant shared that the requirements for receiving and maintaining welfare were time-consuming and created even more barriers to pursuing education and employment options. She said, “It's

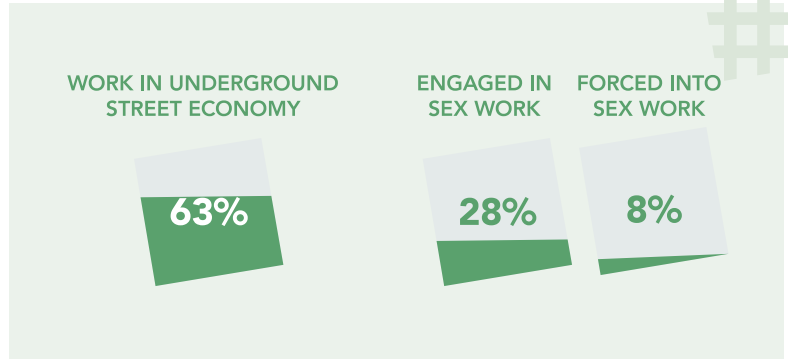


RECEIVED  
FOOD STAMPS WELFARE

72%

93%

like a full-time job. When I was on welfare, I hated it.” During a follow-up inquiry circle in January 2019, a participant reported being told that she may lose her foods stamps because of the government shut down. As a young mother with 2 children, this was alarming news and not just political noise as it is for many middle and upper-class people. Government subsidies do not act as income replacements, require an excessive amount of time, and nowadays have become a tenuous source of income.



Just doing anything. Hustle by any means. If you ask me, you've just got to do what you've got to do to take care of your family.”

A young person tells a story of watching their family members on the streets, and then eventually needing to earn money themselves

In addition to supplementing income through government options, 63% of participants worked in the underground street economy at some point in their life. The underground street economy includes income earned from activities that could be considered an offense. Some people may steal from a local drug store to gather items that they need or to resell them. Others may sell drugs or engage in more high stakes forms of theft. 28% of participants were involved in sex work as a way to earn income and 8% reported being forced to do so. Income from the underground street economy is inconsistent and puts people at risk for personal violence and justice involvement. 23% of participants became involved in the justice system because they were working in the underground street economy.

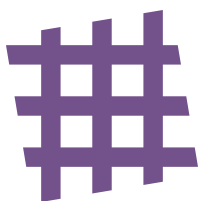
Many participants engaged in this kind of work when they were under 18, and had seen it as the best option available for supporting their family. These are stories of ingenuity and commitment to supporting families against a backdrop of unnecessary barriers and unequal access to upwardly mobile employment.



### RASHIDA'S STORY

Rashida, being the oldest, was forced to start working at the age of 11. She says, "I witnessed the underground street economy through my aunties hustling. I was a watcher at a young age." Rashida always felt responsible for her 3 younger sisters and wanted to provide for them, so they would be able to focus on school. When Rashida needed to start earning an income, very little was available because of her age. She continued to work in the underground street economy intermittently throughout her life, and all of her charges through the justice system are related to this work. Under 18, Rashida was employed in youth programs through community-based

organizations, but they often did not pay well and were temporary, so she still needed supplemental income. As an adult, Rashida has struggled to keep a job because she is forced to spend much of her time concerned with finding a place to stay a night. She has to find creative ways to pull together her monthly budget that are a combination of odd jobs, government subsidies, and working in the underground street economy. Her long-term goals are to attend City College and eventually transfer to a four-year university to invest in a career that will allow her to support young people who are involved in the foster care and juvenile justice systems.



## findings ACE

The relationships that the youth researchers developed with participants are unique, and stand in distinction to the more traditional dynamic between researchers and “subjects.” All the youth researchers are system-involved, grew up in the Bay Area, and are actively engaged with the local community as leaders, organizers, and activists. The youth researchers conducted street outreach in San Francisco and used social media platforms so the initial contact with participants was within a familiar context. The youth researchers called potential participants to discuss the research project as representatives of the YWFC, an organization with strong roots as a liberatory and safe space for system-involved women, girls, and TGNC people. The youth researchers were able to affirm participants stories from an intimate position, as they were incarcerated in the same detention centers, lived in the same communities, and experienced many of the same struggles and triumphs. All of this combined created

an immediate familiarity in their shared research space. Participants disclosed very personal details throughout the entire life course interview. It was impossible to recall housing and not discuss what happened in between those walls, or explain why they were running away from their homes or groups homes. Many young people are aware that if they disclose intimate details of their lives, Child Welfare can remove them from their homes or their family members could



Honestly, I think cause they not gonna tell. I feel like people told you guys in interviews, but when you go in a school, in a prison, a social worker, you're gonna answer these ACE questions like, "I am super happy. I have no problems. Everyone in my household doesn't do drugs. You shy away from all yeses.

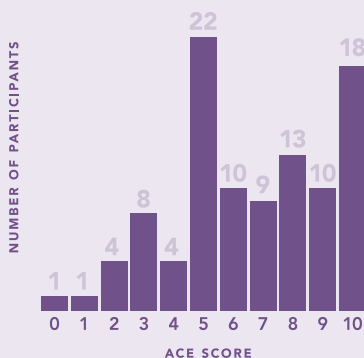
A participant talks about how they approached discussing personal trauma differently in this particular space



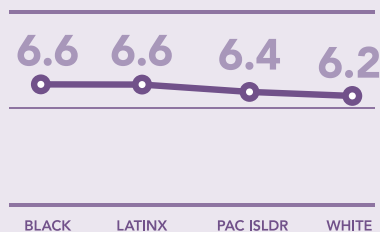
I also think about it like for domestic violence, for removing who deals with violence and abuse. They rather see them in jail than giving them the alternative for a safe home. They rather see them locked up inside the jail and then more trauma happens.

A participant thinking about what it would look like for systems to focus on healing instead of incarceration.

### Distribution of ACE Scores



### Average ACE Score





face detention time, so they avoid sharing these issues and do not seek much-needed support.

Towards the end of the interview, participants were asked to complete an Adverse Childhood Survey (ACE), an instrument that captures reported trauma. The survey contains 10 questions that cover specific events considered common forms of abuse and neglect occurring under the age of 18. It is a quick assessment with only yes or no questions, and the questions are straightforward, but highly personal. A group of researchers in the late 1990s first piloted the ACE survey as they explored the link between childhood experiences and causes of death among over 17,000 well educated, middle-class adults<sup>21</sup>. In the past, researchers focused on one form of trauma, such as physical abuse or domestic violence in the home. The ACE survey measures the cumulative impact of multiple incidents<sup>22</sup>. Researchers found that individuals with high ACE scores are at an increased risk of obtaining chronic disease earlier in their adult life than their trauma-free peers<sup>23</sup>. Since then, practitioners in the field of social work and juvenile justice have begun administering the ACE survey as a risk assessment, and the survey has become commonplace in many fields. Most of the participants in this study were already familiar with the ACE survey and had been asked these same questions from social workers in the foster care system and as part of their intake process in juvenile hall.

In this study, the average ACE score was 6.5, with some slight variation by race, noted in Average ACE Scores graph. Those participants that were in all 3 systems had an average ACE score of 7.6. The Distribution of ACE scores shows how many participants received a particular score, 0 - 10. In this graph you can see that the scores are skewed towards the left where people had ACE scores higher than 5 and 36% of participants had scores between 0 and 4. These findings are in keeping with the breadth of research that has looked at trauma as one of the predominate pathways to incarceration. Researchers have found that for girls, sexual abuse is the strongest predictor for involvement in the juvenile justice system<sup>24</sup>. Also, once survivors are in the juvenile justice system, they are at a higher risk of retraumatization and at risk for being further victimized by other incarcerated people or staff<sup>25</sup>. Survivors of trauma would better be served to receive services that would allow them to heal. Therapeutic treatment, rather than juvenile justice involvement, would more effectively diminish delinquent behavior. Participants recounted not seeking support to heal from the justice system itself because they were afraid that disclosing details about their behavior to a court-appointed therapist could extend their involvement in the justice system.

The research team discovered new insights around the ACE survey as they administered it in during the interview. It became complicated for participants to answer yes or no questions because they wanted to clarify where some of the incidents of trauma occurred. Some happened in their family's homes, but some occurred in institutional settings while they were in the foster care or the justice systems. The yes or no answer did not capture the extent of the traumatic event. Notably, if someone experienced physical or sexual violence in multiple settings throughout their lives, the survey does not capture the difference between this type of abuse happening once or being a daily occurrence over long periods. The ACE is a better tool for people who have lived with their immediate family their entire life, but the participants in this study lived in a variety of community and institutional

settings when they were growing up. Additionally, the researchers were struck by the severity of emotional responses people had to discussing the violence that happened to them on a personal level and the structural violence they experienced through systems. Participants were much more overwhelmed and traumatized when speaking about being homeless or being detained in group homes than they were when discussing physical or sexual abuse in their personal lives. Institutional trauma was a force that felt more oppressive and debilitating than experiencing individual level trauma. For people who have not grown up in poverty and institutional systems, these findings would likely be shocking. When a person is experiencing homelessness, living on the streets, or incarceration, they are directly dealing with trauma in every moment. It is a condition that shapes every aspect of their daily life and hinders the potential to create a healthy future for themselves. More recently, a broad base movement to end violence against women and TGNC people has emerged. The YWFC center has consistently worked to stop this type of violence, and they also want to create a more expansive understanding of what constitutes violence in lives of system-involved women, girls, and TNGC people's lives.



## RASHIDA'S STORY

When Rashida was living with her family, she received health care coverage through Medi-Cal. Now that she is 23, she is unsure if she is still covered. Overall, Rashida is in good health, although she recommends that schools better educate young people about their health. She recommends, "I think having more classes in the curriculum for school, talking about health for our young people, because I think that's important. Diabetes runs in our communities." Rashida's mental health history includes chronic and extensive trauma within her home and in her community as she moved through the foster care and the juvenile justice systems. She has an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) score of 10, which is the highest possible score, indicating that she is at higher risk for chronic disease, mental illness, and becoming a victim of violence. Once Rashida entered the foster care system at age 14, her health care was managed by the foster and later the juvenile justice systems. Both mandated Rashida to see several mental health care professionals. Rashida recognizes the potential healing power of therapy, but because the juvenile

justice system mandated it, she did not feel it was a safe place because her therapist would report to the court system. While in the group homes at age 15, Rashida was "forced to take meds" and had them administered to go to sleep and to wake up. As a result, she was extraordinarily drowsy and foggy-minded. Rashida decided to stop taking the medication but struggled to sleep at night due to PTSD, so she used marijuana as a medicinal option for a sleep aid.

Rashida's story highlights the complications that arise when the justice system is the primary mental health care provider for youth. Rashida would have benefitted from high-quality mental health care to address the many traumas that she experienced, which would have facilitated her overall mental and physical well-being. Despite the lack of access to these services, Rashida demonstrates a high level of resilience as she looks forward in life and focuses on overcoming obstacles. She hopes to work with other young people in the system because she will be able to relate to them in a way that her service providers were unable to.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

For this team, research is only as powerful as the change that it can make in the world. The Freedom Research Institute is situated geographically and ideologically at the heart of the YWFC, and they are beholden to honor the legacy and power of the 38,000 women, girls, and TGNC people that have been a part of the YWFC's 26-year legacy. The researchers explicitly told their participants that they were collecting their stories to fight systematic oppression and to gather the tools needed to build a newly imagined community. In this new community, young folks like themselves would be able to live in a world that is freer than the one today — a city where their lives and their family's lives operate from a place of abundance. The team is ending this report with a collection of quotations on freedom from system-involved women and TGNC people of color, so the reader understands that this work is rooted in liberation. The conditions in which the participants and the members of the YWFC have had to navigate throughout their life are painful. What emerges from this struggle are a new set of leaders, who are prepared to lay the groundwork for a liberatory path towards a society that does not just work for those born in the right zip code with the right skin color, but a community where all members can live healthy, peaceful, and abundant lives. This project is not the panacea, but a simple brick, but with enough bricks, laid by enough freedom fighters across the globe, we can move out of the remains of historical legacies of oppression and into a world so entirely and categorically different than this one.

The impetus for this project's development came out of a call to build a healthier juvenile justice system, but as the researchers dug in, they expanded their scope to the many systems that shape people's lives. The team found that they needed to create a complex and nuanced understanding of system-involvement that explored the impact of state control and criminalization that operates in every institutional system for poor people of color. Communities of color are adversely impacted by punitive policies of surveillance that are a result of the war on drugs and have been sustained by the prison industrial complex. These disciplinary systems, rooted in the practices of the patriarchy and capitalism, commodify the bodies of marginalized communities in ways far more complex than simply putting people behind bars. The living knowledge of the YWFC and what the research findings confirm is that imprisonment is not an occurrence that happens exclusively inside of prisons and jails, but an operating functioning of society. The carcel state lives inside of the relationships between parents and children, creates the barriers to inequitable economic opportunities, drives the housing options for communities of color that are both environmentally toxic and segregated, and comes from vast historical oppression. Thus, the policy recommendations proposed in this report demand a radically new model that requires bold ideas that are centered in love and dignity for all human life.

The research team has held focus groups with the YWFC's leadership team and participants. Based on these findings, the YWFC will begin to develop a platform for systems transformation and policy re-imagination. After 26 years of experience, the members of the YWFC have become skilled advocates in the struggle to dismantle the current carcel state and are best situated, through their experiential and historical knowledge, to develop a policy and legislative platform for San Francisco and California. This report includes initial policy recommendations that are for a general audience and a set to specifically address their local city of San Francisco. The team will continue to expand their conversations around policy reform as they continue to analyze their data

and share their findings, they will be sharing these recommendations over the course of the following 24 months. The research team will be directly working with San Francisco city agencies to share the recommendations from the participants' lived experiences in systems to reform policy for those still entangled in the justice and foster care systems. The collaboration between system-involved researchers and system's stakeholders is a powerful act of amnesty and demonstrates fierce love for their communities. It is this kind of fierce love that will fuel the fire to build a new model for humanity.

## General Recommendations

The current structures of system-involvement that touch the lives of women, girls, and TGNC people with the intent of providing social service and safety to individuals or communities need to be radically reorganized. The team calls for a reduction in bureaucratic barriers and policy that centers the needs of women, girls, and TGNC people that have been most impacted by the prison industrial complex. This radical restructuring must include communication across agencies, but also a process of community engagement prioritizing those most historically impacted by policies of domination and oppression.

The following policy recommendations are grounded in creating ethical and just communities and support services. At the federal, state, and county levels, government institutions need to address deep-rooted biases that cause disproportionality and criminalization. Instead of looking to reform one system, reformers need to consider the entanglement of multiple, not work in silos, and collaborate across sectors in housing, health care, justice systems, child welfare, and economic markets. Moderate and unidirectional approach to reforming one system and recommending policy alternatives is impossible and irresponsible—the state and its people are more complex than a single, root cause. Ideally, systems will utilize community-driven data to drive these changes.

- Increase communication across different agencies and departments. For example, Child Welfare, juvenile justice system and public schools should be able to work together to create self-determined plans for young people.
- Establish community engagement strategies at county and state levels, so that those most impacted have a seat at decisions making tables.
- Decrease reliance on government agencies as service providers. Instead, move towards funding for direct services, support, alternatives to incarceration, reentry, family reunification, through community-based programming.
- Shift resources to local communities to reduce barriers for people of color to access services and support
- Remove limitations that holding a criminal record has on the ability to obtain public housing, employment, and education financial aid.
- Remove all unnecessary surveillance and policing mechanisms, such as ankle monitors, so that justice impacted people can rebuild their lives and assert their independence.

- Develop protocols, systems, and policies that are individualized, people-centered, culturally competent, and grounded in love and humanity as practices of freedom.
- Prioritize strategy interventions that do not only focus on crisis support and immediate needs but also build long-term strategies driven by individual self-determination.
- Consider all systems that touch an individual's life, taking into account the whole person and the totality of their experience, to provide supportive programming and services.
- Prioritize investment of resources and support in families and communities that have been most disproportionately impacted by the war on drugs and mass incarceration including. For example, fast-tracking housing programs, increased economic opportunities, child care, and wrap-around support to stop intergenerational involvement in the child welfare and juvenile justice and adult justice systems.
- Commit to hiring staff that reflects the communities that have been most impacted by system-involvement, with an emphasis on women, girls, and TGNC people of color.

## San Francisco Recommendations

The demographic, physical, social and economic landscape of San Francisco has undergone dramatic changes in the past fifteen years. San Francisco has experienced rapid market-based gentrification as the technology industry has continued to grow and dominate the socio-economic and political atmosphere of a once diverse city. Today, San Francisco is known for high rents, a downtown flooded with technology companies, and is increasingly unlivable for working-class and poor people. San Francisco is one of the wealthiest economies in the world, and yet economic disparities remain governed by race and class. Rather than arguing about the shifts that have already occurred, the team wants to facilitate a discussion around what it would look like to support those original native communities of color that are left and to build a city where diverse members can live and thrive together in the 415. To meet the community's immediate and basic needs, we recommend that San Francisco focuses on two core areas of reform—affordable housing and economic opportunities.

### Housing

- Divest from fully funded departments that criminalize and incarcerate, women, girls, and TGNC people and their families and invest in housing.
- Increased funding for rapid housing for homeless women, girls and TGNC people.

- The removal of barriers and restrictions for housing that excludes people with criminal records.
- The removal of the age limit and other barriers related to parenting that inhibit young parents from receiving funding and services around housing
- The creation of more supportive housing programs that fall outside the scope of drug rehabilitation or traditionally state-sponsored group homes
- The creation of more supportive housing programs that are culturally relevant and prioritize building a safe environment for women, girls, and TGNC people
- Increased funding directed towards alternative programming for people of color displaced from their families and communities by the juvenile, adult, and foster care systems; specifically, creating housing to support non-minor dependents and those returning to the community on probation or parole

## Economic Opportunities

- The creation of jobs and economic opportunities for young people that invest in building leadership and professional skills that will serve their financial futures
- Investment in high-quality skill-building programs led by a local community organization that emphasize the development of social and emotional skills for a healthier adult life
- Increased pathways and programming that lead to jobs that pay a living wage comparable to the cost of living in San Francisco
- The building of training programs that increase professional skills and lead to increased economic stability
- A commitment to divestment from criminalization and detention and investment in supporting communities most impacted by system-involvement

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## REFLECTIONS ON FREEDOM

Freedom to me is investing in the leadership and power of the most marginalized communities to be at the forefront of solutions that directly impact their communities. Because if they're not free, I'm not free.

Freedom is peace. Sometimes we find that peace when we're sitting in a cage that they designed to break us down. Our refusal to lose ourselves and our connection to something bigger than our situation is a revolutionary act that we carry in silence.

I feel like freedom from the systems means to just be. The freedom to be, to stay where you want to live, to say what you want to do, to do what you want to do, to say what you want to say. You got the freedom to do stuff without nobody penalizing you for being you, incriminating you.

Freedom to me is increasing options

Freedom looks like living in a neighborhood where police are not incentivized to live in it or have a station in it. Freedom looks like grocery stores with fresh produce in walking distance owned by local people that know me and the rest of the neighbors. Freedom looks like being able to afford my rent (because I cannot afford to own anything) without constant fear of displacement and homelessness when I work every day very hard doing meaningful work. 3 generations into poverty/low-income status on my mother's side, Freedom looks like women taking care of themselves and each other, having our needs met through the jobs we spend tirelessly working so that we can take care of our basic needs. I cannot imagine freedom without my basic needs met without strife, struggle, or pain. THAT is freedom to me, the ability to make baseline decisions about my life from a place of abundance and access because I can afford to live.

Freedom is peace, and you can't take that from us.

To be free is to just be free, and no worries. If we get the basic things that we need, we could then worry about other things like our education that will help us get up there. Just being free from my past history, from institutions.

Freedom is no walls, no borders, and justice for the land.

I think at this point in my journey... freedom to me is... living beyond "equity." Living in a world where anything is really possible... where I wouldn't have to live in the shadow of oppressive systems that follow me around like a black cloud. Where the color of my skin won't deem the likelihood of my overall access, debt, health and maximum capacity in society when I am so much more than the labels but most importantly where we don't have to teach our children to fend for their lives from institutions that are built to take them out and hold them back.

Freedom is having radical trans women or gender non-binary president. When that happens, I'll be free.

Freedom to me is dismantling patriarchy and replacing it with love and restorative justice

I think freedom for me, it means there's no barriers to stuff and my basic human needs are met so I can elevate myself and be able to come to my full potential. If that means I don't have to think about housing or where my next meal is coming from, I can focus on elevating my thinking in my mind and getting to the next step. Can you imagine what we could all really do if we're not fighting to not be hungry or, "Damn, I got to sleep, I got to find somewhere to sleep tonight?"

Freedom is when we break free from your systems. When we learn that we are bigger than what you told us we are.

Being able to do what you want and express yourself how you want. No chains. No cuffs. No Boundaries. Freedom from the systems means to me - No Racism. No judgment. Being happy and content with myself.

Freedom is when we reach back and pull the next sibling with us because we see your brilliance and know you will shine when you are surrounded by real love and not under attack alone.